



# PUBERTY

**Growth and Change in Girls**



***A handbook for every adolescent girl***

# WHAT IS PUBERTY?



- Puberty is a normal biological process in the life of girls and boys. It is when their bodies begin to develop and change as they become adults.
- Puberty usually begins between the ages of 8 and 14 for girls and 12 to 16 for boys. At this age, most girls and boys begin to notice changes in their physical bodies and emotions. The physical changes affect girls and boys differently.
- Puberty starts when extra amounts of chemicals called the hormones begin to be produced in the body. These hormones lead to changes in the body and apart from causing physical changes, the hormones cause emotional changes.
- These physical and emotional changes take place over a number of years.
- These changes are sometimes called "Puberty" or "Adolescence", and girls and boys at this age are often called "Adolescents"

## WHEN DOES PUBERTY BEGIN AND HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?

- Puberty usually begins between the ages of 8 and 14 for girls and 12 to 16 for boys.
- Generally changes start earlier for girls than for boys but some may start before the age, while others start after the age.



# WHAT ARE THE PHYSICAL CHANGES THAT TAKE PLACE IN GIRLS DURING PUBERTY?



Girls experience several changes during puberty. These changes are perfectly normal and should not cause fear or despair in girls.

- The first sign of puberty in girls is usually that their breasts begin to develop. It is normal for breast buds to sometimes be very tender or for one breast to start to develop several months before the other one.
- During puberty in girls they begin to produce eggs and boys begin to produce sperm.
- The hips start getting rounder.

- Hair starts to grow in the pubic area and under the armpits. Girls may also notice more hair on their legs and arms.

At a later stage, after a year or so of puberty beginning, and for the next couple of years, more changes occur:

- The girl's breasts continue to grow and become fuller
- She experiences her first period when she starts menstruation.
- Pubic hair and underarm hair increases.
- Girls start to sweat more.
- They may often get acne or pimples especially on the face
- They have white vaginal discharge
- Girls go through a growth spurt. From the time their periods start, girls grow annually over the next year or two, then reach their adult height.
- Most girls gain weight – and it's normal for this to happen – as their body shape changes.
- Girls develop more body fat along their upper arms, thighs and upper back; their hips grow rounder and their waist gets narrower.

*This is a very special time and it is body's way of maturing to enable girls have children and start their own families in future. Even though girls' bodies start having the ability to have children, it does not mean that they are ready to have children.*

# WHAT ARE THE EMOTIONAL CHANGES THAT TAKE PLACE IN GIRLS?

- As girls' bodies go through changes, they also experience mood swings. The moods are between feeling confident and happy to feeling angry, irritated and depressed in a short span of time
- Due to the several changes girls undergo during puberty, they become overly sensitive and feel uncomfortable about the changes and physical appearances.
- They start looking for identity and trying to understand their changes.
- They start feeling uncertain about things, especially because as the girl begins to go through puberty, she is not completely an adult nor a child. This uncertainty becomes more evident when the expectations that people close to girls have from them also change. For example, girls may be expected to take on greater responsibilities than what was expected from them as children. Eventually you will grow into your new roles and become more certain about yourself.
- Peer pressure may be experienced and conversations with friends will increase as they are likely to be influenced by what they see around them.
- Conflicting thoughts may occur when girls feel stuck between how they were as children and how they wish to be as adults. For example, you might want to be more independent and at the same time, you might also look for support from your parents.
- Sometimes girls start feeling conscious about themselves, their bodies and growing up. These experiences are more pronounced for girls because they develop faster and earlier than boys. The

development of breasts and widening of hips make them feel more conscious about their bodies in the presence of their peers of the same age group or even adults.

- They begin to experience sexual feelings because puberty is also the phase when girls and boys begin to develop sexual maturity. Sexual maturity is the stage of life when one can have children. It is a good idea to talk to a mature adult (like your mother, doctor teacher, or a counsellor) with whom you're comfortable discussing sex.

## WHAT IS MENSTRUATION?

- Menstruation is the shedding of blood monthly. This means that a girl's body is growing up and is preparing for the future when she can get pregnant and have a baby.
- During menstruation the body sheds the lining of the uterus (also called the womb). Menstrual blood flows from the uterus through the small opening in the cervix and passes out of the body through the vagina.
- The bleeding usually lasts for 3 to 7 days every month. Sometimes it can be 2 to 7 days.
- Most girls have their first period between the ages of 11 to 14. Some girls start as early as 8 and some at 17 or older.
- Menstruation is a very normal biological process that occurs as a girl is growing into a woman. There is no need to fear when the bleeding starts.

## DOES HAVING A PERIOD HURT?

- Sometimes girls may experience slight pain during their period while some girls may not feel any pains.
- The pains are called “cramps” because they are caused by the muscles of the uterus contracting.
- It is the contraction of the uterus that pushes out the lining of the uterus each month and it comes out as blood.
- Some pains are mild and occur in the abdomen and lower back. Some can be severe.
- If the pain is severe, girls should take pain relieving medicines.
- Usually, if there is pain, it does not last long.



## IF MENSTRUATION OCCURS EVERY MONTH, HOW DO I KNOW WHEN THE NEXT ONE WILL COME?

- A girl sees her period every 21 to 35 days. The calculation starts from the first day of a girls' period (when bleeding starts) to the first day of the next period.
- It is advisable that a girl keeps a record of the monthly period. For example record the first day it starts on a calendar. Also take note of how many days the blood flows.
- For many years after a girl starts having her period she may not get her period every month because it can skip until it finally stabilizes. This is normal and should not create any fear or worry.

## HOW DO I MANAGE MY FIRST PERIOD?

- Don't be afraid when you start your first period. It can be scary to see blood on your panties, but it is very normal and natural.
- First talk to an older female about it for advice, like your mother, grandmother, aunts, older sisters, female teachers, female friend, or an older woman in your community.
- If you are at school, talk to your school female nurse, a female teacher or a fellow female student and they will help you.
- Also feel proud because your body is developing into a young woman.

## HOW TO CAPTURE BLOOD

- Place a clean menstrual cloth or a clean pad or clean cotton wool on your panties before wearing your panties.
- Change the menstrual cloth, pad or cotton wool every 2-3 hours or more if you think that the blood flow is getting heavy. This means up to 3-4 times a day.
- If you are bleeding heavily and you need to change more times, ask an older woman or health worker for advice.
- If a girl is going to school, she should take an extra clean menstrual cloth, cotton wool or pad in a plastic bag so that she can change after a few hours in school.
- If a girl has a blood stain on her uniform in school, she can tie a cloth or sweater around her waist and ask a friend or teacher to help.

## HOW DO I DISPOSE OF THE USED MENSTRUAL MATERIAL?

- If you are using a pad or cotton wool, wrap it properly after use and dispose it neatly in a sanitary disposal bag. Or you can burn it in the incinerator where available.
- You can also wrap it in paper and put it in a bag for disposal later.
- If you are using a period cloth, put it into a plastic bag until you can wash it with clean hot water and soap. Dry it in the sun and iron it.



## HOW DO I KEEP MYSELF CLEAN DURING YOUR PERIOD?

- Take a bath twice everyday (morning and evening) and wash your genital area with clean water and mild soap.
- Pat your genital area dry with a clean towel and put a fresh menstrual cloth or cotton wool or pad on your panties.
- Keep unused menstrual cloths and pads clean and wrapped in tissue paper or cellophane bags for future use.
- Pat the area dry with a towel and put a fresh menstrual cloth or cotton wool or pad on your panties.



## WHAT IS PMS?

- PMS stands for pre-menstrual syndrome.
- Not all girls experience PMS, but many do for a few days before they start their period.
- This is because changes in the level of hormones in a girl's body can affect her moods.
- Some girls feel sad while others feel irritable and get angry for no real reason.
- Some girls' breasts feel swollen and sore.
- This is all normal and natural and should not cause any worry.
- Many girls experience discomfort during their period. This is also normal. But if the pain is severe, they may need to take medication.
- Girls should feel free to talk to mothers, their grandmothers, sisters, aunties and female teachers.

## HOW TO MANAGE THE STOMACH PAIN (CRAMPS) FROM YOUR PERIOD

- You can put a warm cloth on your stomach area when you are resting.
- You can try to do some exercises and keep your body active.
- You can drink a warm cup of water.
- You can take pain relieving medicines every 4-6 hours of the most painful days.



# IS THERE ANY DANGER IN MENSTRUATION?

- Every month, when the ovary releases an egg cell, it travels towards the uterus through the fallopian tube. The uterus prepares for a possible pregnancy by developing a uterine lining made of tissue and blood vessels. This lining is called endometrium.
- The uterine lining is shed and it exits the body through the vagina as a mixture of blood and tissue over a course of 3 to 7 days. This is called menstruation or a period.
- The cycle starts over again with an egg that begins to mature in one of the ovaries. This cycle is called menstrual cycle and is generally 25 to 35 days long.
- But if a young girl engages in sexual activity or intercourse with a male, his sperm will fertilize her egg and pregnancy will occur.
- Although menstruation means a girl is biologically able to have a baby, girls are not advised to have a child until they are over 18 years old.
- If a girl who has her periods every month misses a period it may mean that she is pregnant, especially if she has had sexual intercourse.
- Having a baby when the body is not ready can cause many health problems for a girl and her baby.
- But girls can also miss their periods if they are feeling stressed, if they become too thin or if they have been traveling.

# REAL TOLD STORIES OF FIRST MENSTRUATION

## Story 1

"The day I saw my first period, it was in the morning. I started having abdominal cramps. I didn't know what it was and I told my aunty that I was having severe abdominal pain. She also didn't know, so she asked me to go and fetch water. When I went to fetch the water, my stomach was in so much pain that I could not go further. So I dropped the bucket and laid outside on the bare ground and I didn't fetch the water again. A woman passing by saw me and stopped to ask what the matter was. As I got up, there were blood stains on my body. I told her that I didn't know how I got the stains. By the time I got home, my grandmother had returned from the market. She scolded my aunty for not checking further to see what was wrong with me. My grandmother then treated me and asked me to go and bathe. After I bathes, she gave me something and took me to the bathroom and told me that the blood that has come out from me is a sign of maturity. She explained that I am now a grown woman and if any boy or man touches me, I will become pregnant. She handed me a piece of her old menstrual cloth and showed me how to put it on my pant. She said I should be very careful how I walk, run and bend down when sweeping the floor. She also told me that I should change it when it is soaked and should learn to take my bath morning and evening, to avoid bad odor. I remember sleeping all day that day and could not eat. I was sad and still did not understand what was happening to me. Two days later, my grandmother asked me if the blood was still coming on. I said yes but not much. I had to tell her that I ran out of pieces of clothes she gave to me earlier. She further asked where I hung the ones I used. I told her that I did not wash them but I hid them under the mat. She screamed at me and used the head of the broom to hit me. As she was

hitting me, I cried and answered that I could not wash it because I was shy that people living in the compound would know. I was forced to bring them out at night and washed them with clean hot water and soap. My grandmother, not knowing what to do with me took pity on me and gave me step by step instruction on when to expect the next menstruation, how to keep myself clean, and the importance of washing the menstrual materials.

Above all, she told me not to follow or play with males. Up till now I cherish the advice my grandmother gave to me. The only difference is that I use menstrual pad now when I am in school, but when I am at home I use cloth. This is because it is easier to throw away used pad in the school pit toilet than to manage used cloth. The kind of shame and pain I felt and the kind of beating I received will never go away from my head. If I get married and have girls, I will begin to tell them early and I will not beat them for not knowing.”

## Story 2

“It has been a long time ago that I started seeing it. I was staying at my maternal family at the time. I was 13 years then. I was going to pick up mangoes when I felt a cold sensation. I told this to my aunty who laughed. After laughing she asked me to go and wash it off. She tore some pieces of old cloth and gave to me and also bought me some new pants and drugs for the abdominal cramps I was having. I placed the pieces of cloth in my pant but did not feel comfortable walking with it. When my aunty's husband came back from work, he asked me to set the table for his food. As I sluggishly went to get him water to wash his hands for his meal, he began scolding me saying, “You foolish girl. Since when have you started walking like a baby with heavy overload diaper on her?” When I hesitated a little in giving him the water because I was uncomfortable and nervous, he then pushed me hard and I fell down. My menstrual cloth came off with my heavy fall. He screamed and said that I had committed an unforgiveable sin and

should leave his house to go cleanse myself. He shouted and said that as a traditionalist, a menstruating girl can never serve him food and I had ruined him forever. My aunty pleaded severally with him not send me out of the house and that I had not committed any crime. She explained that the menstruation just started. He demanded that I leave the house for more than a week to the village until the menses stopped.

Very confused, with pains and shame I had to go to the village to stay with a senior aunty. She calmed me down, and explained to me that every woman goes through this and that it is an occasion worth celebrating for any girl that sees her period. Till date, I see menstruation with mixed feelings because of my unfortunate first experience. I don't even wish my worst enemy this kind of terrible experience. It is good to be educated and know these things before one starts menstruation."

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT MENSTRUATION

## **Is it normal if I do not get have period every month?**

Yes. When girls' bodies are developing the period is often not regular and can skip months.

## **Is it normal if you have your period for 5 days one time, for 6 days another time and 4 days another time?**

Yes. Every girls' period is different and will last different numbers of days as she is growing up.

## **Is it normal if you have your period on a different day each month?**

Yes. A typical menstrual cycle is 28 days but it can range between 21 and 35 days depending on the girl.

## **Is it normal to have my period for 3 days and my friend has her period for 5 days?**

Yes. The average length of a period is 5 days but it can range from 2 to 7 days.

## **Is it normal to have breast pains when you are growing up?**

Yes. As a girl's body is developing, many internal changes are happening and minor pains are natural.

## **Is it normal for boys not to have periods?**

Yes. Boys' reproductive systems are different and they cannot be pregnant with babies. So they do not go through menstruation.

**Is it normal to feel shy when you have your period?**

Yes. Many girls feel shy because they are not used to managing their period. This is normal and as you get older and used to the changes, you will feel less shy and more confident.

**Is it normal for girls to be easily angry when they have their period?**

Yes. The hormones that are moving in a girl's body when she has her period can cause mood swings.

**Is it normal for a girl start her period when she is 8, 9, 10 or 11 years of age?**

Yes. There are a wide range of ages when girls can start their periods. It ranges from 8, 9 or up until 17 or 18 years of age.

**Is it normal for a girl to sometimes have blood clots coming out with her period?**

Yes. Thick clumps of blood in your period are normal and are called "clots". They are more frequent when you have been lying down, so you may see more when you wake up in the morning.

**Is it normal to have pimples during your period?**

Yes. Many girls and women will have pimples just before or during their period.

**Is it normal to have water-like or white discharge from the vagina right before or after your period?**

Yes. Once, a girl's body starts to go through puberty, having some clear or milky-white discharge is normal. During her period the menstrual blood can be different colors including bright red, light pink or even browner in color.

**Is it normal to experience stomach pain during your period?**

Yes. "Cramps" are pains in the lower abdomen that may happen during or just before your period. Minimal or medium pain is normal. But if the pain is very severe, you should see a doctor or nurse for medicine. Some girls never have pain.

