

Puberty: Body changes

Using this resource

Talking about puberty can be awkward and uncomfortable for you and your child. Depending on your child's comfort levels and reading ability, you may want to give this resource to your child and be available to answer questions; go through the resource together; or use this as a list of prompts for yourself when talking to your child.

This resource is divided into four sections: changes that will happen to everyone; changes that will happen if you have a penis; changes that will happen if you have breasts; and changes that will happen if you have a vagina. It has been set out this way instead of dividing by gender for a couple of reasons. It's useful for young people to know what's happening to each other's bodies (and autistic children will often need to know everything about a new subject like puberty, including the parts that don't apply directly to them). Autistic people are also more likely than the general population to be transgender, meaning that their gender doesn't match their body, and/or non-binary, meaning that they don't have a gender (or have a more complex relationship with gender). It's common for transgender and non-binary people to figure this out during puberty as their body starts changing in upsetting ways, and being able to find information about their body parts rather than a gender that they're not sure applies to them can make the process a bit easier.

More information

IHC has two videos for children with intellectual or learning disabilities – ‘Billy grows up’ explains puberty and body changes for boys, and ‘Tara grows up’ explains periods and how to wear a pad. (‘Billy grows up’ is not recommended for children with any doubts or complex feelings around their gender.)

Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa has a range of resources on periods, including management tips and options for different period products – check them out here: <https://sexualwellbeing.org.nz/adv/periods/>

These sites cover puberty in more depth – one aimed at adults: <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/puberty/Pages/default.aspx> and one aimed at children: <https://kidshealth.org/en/kids/puberty.html>

During puberty, your body changes from a child's body to an adult's body. Some of these changes might be exciting; some might be scary or uncomfortable. Feeling uncomfortable with your new body is normal, and doesn't mean that anything is wrong. If something about your new body is painful, or if it's really uncomfortable and you think something might be wrong, talk to a parent or another trusted adult.

Changes that will happen to everyone:

- Hair will grow under your arms and around your genitals. You may also grow more or thicker hair on your legs.
- You will start to smell more strongly. You will probably need to shower once a day (if you weren't already), and use some kind of deodorant. Some deodorants have very strong smells; others don't smell much themselves but will mask the smell of your body. If you are sensitive to smells you may want to investigate a few different options (get an adult to help if you need it), and find one that smells ok. For some people, crystal alum deodorants might be a good solution, as they have no scent.
- You may notice that your genital area has a smell, or has a different smell. You will need to wash your genitals every day (if you weren't already).
- You will get taller. This might happen quickly or slowly. If it happens very quickly, you may get stretch marks – these are silvery or purple stripes that appear on your skin, usually around your stomach, hips, or legs. They often fade over time, but sometimes they can be permanent. You may also experience growing pains. If you're growing very fast, your legs or (less commonly) your torso might ache. This doesn't mean that anything's wrong, and it will stop when you stop growing. If you are concerned, talk to your parent or a trusted adult.
- Along with growing taller, your limbs will get longer. You might find that you're clumsier – you might bang into things more often, or trip over more often, or generally not feel as if you're entirely in control of your body and the way you're moving. As your body gets used to its new size, this will fade.

More changes that will happen to everyone:

- You may want to masturbate. Masturbation is the act of touching your own genitals for sexual pleasure. This is normal, and will not harm you. If you do want to masturbate, you need to find a private space where you can be sure no one will see or hear you. If you have a penis, you will need to think about cleaning up after yourself, either by masturbating in the shower or by using a tissue, a paper towel, or a sock or shirt that you can wash.
- You might be really hungry – your body needs more fuel to get through all the growth and changes of puberty.
- You might get pimples or acne on your face. This can feel uncomfortable, and you might not like the way you look with pimples. Getting a few pimples is normal. They will usually stop appearing, or appear much less often, as you get older. Washing your face at least once a day can help to reduce pimples.

Changes that will happen if you have a penis:

- Your penis will get bigger.
- You will get erections. An erection happens when your penis fills with blood and becomes hard. Sometimes this feels good, and may make you want to touch your penis. Sometimes it can be inconvenient or embarrassing. Crossing your legs or holding something in front of your groin can help to hide an embarrassing erection, and if you don't touch your penis it will get soft again.
- You may have wet dreams. This is when you ejaculate in your sleep, sometimes because you were having a sexual dream. Ejaculating is when your penis produces semen, a whitish-grey fluid. You may find that your clothing or bedding is wet when you wake up. Wet dreams are normal, and happen to most people.
- You may get stronger, and find it easy to gain muscle.
- Your voice will get deeper. This happens gradually, and your voice will probably be unpredictable while it happens. Your voice might crack, meaning it suddenly gets high again for a word or two while you're talking. This is normal, and happens to everyone whose voice breaks.

Changes that will happen if you have breasts:

- Your breasts will grow. You may want to start wearing a bra. This can be really uncomfortable at first, but it will stop your breasts from moving around, which can also be uncomfortable or painful. If you're not sure whether you need a bra, talk to a parent or other trusted adult. You may need to try a few different kinds of bra before you find one that works for you. You can ask a shop assistant for help finding a bra that fits.
- Your breasts will probably be very sensitive and tender while they're still growing. It might really hurt to bump into things with your chest. It might be uncomfortable to wear fabrics that were previously fine. When your breasts stop growing, the extra sensitivity will stop happening.

Changes that will happen if you have a vagina:

- Your hips may get wider.
- You will start having periods. Periods normally start around the age of 11 or 12, but can start from the age of 9 or 10. When you have a period, your uterus sheds blood and tissue, which comes out of your vagina. You may have painful cramps leading up to and/or during your period. If these cramps are bad enough that Panadol (or another over-the-counter pain relief) isn't helping, you can talk to your doctor about using some stronger painkillers. Holding a hot water bottle on your lower stomach can also help with pain and cramps.
- You will need to use pads, tampons, a menstrual cup, or period-proof underwear to catch the blood and tissue that comes out during your period. You may feel more comfortable with pads or period underwear to begin with, because tampons and menstrual cups both need to be inserted into your vagina. You can move on to using tampons or a cup when you feel more comfortable, or you can keep using pads or underwear – it's up to you. Whatever method you choose, you will need to go to the toilet and change your pad, tampon, or period underwear, or empty your menstrual cup, at least twice a day. You will probably need to do this more often for the first day or two of your period.
- Your period will come approximately every four weeks, and will last for three to six days. While you're a teenager, your period can be very unpredictable; it normally becomes more regular as you get older.
- Having your period can be very uncomfortable. Be kind to yourself while you're on your period – take extra breaks if you need them, eat a bar of chocolate or another treat if it'll make you feel better, and you may feel comfortable letting your parents know that you're on your period and need a lot of time and space to yourself for a couple of days.

More changes that will happen if you have a vagina:

- If your period is really painful or distressing, there are birth control pills that can stop it from happening. Talk to your doctor or a trusted adult about what is involved in going on birth control pills, and what it will mean for your body.
- Period stains happen, and they can be really embarrassing – if you have a period stain on the back of your trousers or skirt, and you have a sweatshirt or jacket with you, you can tie it around your waist to hide the stain. If you are at school when a stain happens, the school nurse or receptionist (or another trusted adult) can help you, and should have some spare clothes for you to wear, or know where to get some. If it happens at home, you can wash your clothes or bedsheets in cold water with Napisan or another stain remover (get an adult to help you with this if you need to). Remember that many of the women around you also have periods, and most of them will have had some sort of embarrassing period incident – they know what you’re going through and they’ll be able to help.