

PUBERTY CHANGES IN GIRLS

The changes of puberty in girls include growth in height, change in body contour, breast growth, development of pubic and underarm hair, and the beginning of menstruation. An individual girl may begin her changes at a time different from her peers.

- **GROWTH SPURT**

An increase in height as well as a rounding of the hips occurs between ages 10 and 14, about two years before the growth spurt in boys. It is important for girls to understand that their changing body shape does not mean that they will become fat and should not prompt dieting!

- **BREAST DEVELOPMENT**

Breast growth begins between 8 and 13 years of age. It is common for breast growth to begin with just one breast and to be asymmetric. Growing breasts are often tender. Breasts usually continue to grow for a period of time after the first menstrual cycle.

- **PUBIC HAIR**

Both pubic and underarm hair begins to appear between 9 and 13 years of age, with age 11 being the average. At first the hairs are fine and silky; they become coarser and curlier with time.

- **VAGINAL DISCHARGE**

Before periods begin, a hormone called estrogen will cause the glands around the vagina to produce clear-to-white mucus that may cause dampness or a staining on the underwear. When dried, the discharge may look yellow. This is painless and normal and is not a sign of infection. Sticky green or yellow discharge or sores should be discussed with your doctor.

- **MENSTRUATION**

The first period usually occurs between ages 10 and 16 with 12 being average. Periods are often irregular at first, with longer or shorter intervals between cycles. Bleeding usually lasts between 3 and 10 days. Girls who have started periods and then skip more than 4 cycles in a row should discuss this with their doctor. Sexually active girls must report any late period because pregnancy must be considered as a cause for the delay. Girls who have not started periods by age 16 should also be evaluated. Normal cycles occur every 21-45 days. Count from the beginning of one to the beginning of the next. It is a good idea to mark your calendar each day you have your period. Most girls use pads but tampons may be used at any age. It may take some practice to get comfortable inserting tampons. Tampons must be changed often (at least 4 times each day) and should not be used continuously through the menstrual period. Use the lowest absorbency tampon suitable for your needs.

Cramps are not common during the early years of menstruation but may become a problem as teen years continue. Regular exercise helps, and medicines such as ibuprofen or naprosyn can relieve cramps. Heat is also soothing. The pain is usually worst on the first day and lessens as the period continues. If cramps worsen toward the end of the period, discuss this with your doctor.

Once periods begin, it is essential for girls to have enough dietary iron to avoid anemia. (18 mg per day) Foods rich in iron include dark green vegetables, meat, fortified cereals, dried beans, dried fruit (including raisins), nuts, and seeds. Iron is also found in eggs, watermelon, strawberries, and sweet potatoes. Vitamins with iron are also available. (see our Iron handout)