
Living With Your Teen: Understanding Physical Changes

Late childhood and early adolescence is one of the most dramatic periods of rapid physical change in children. During this period, children physically become adults. Knowledge of these physical changes may help you support your child through this time. Keep in mind that the age of physical changes varies greatly from one child to another.

As early as age seven in girls and nine in boys, changes take place in the growth of organs and in hormones. On average, girls begin to gain weight around age 11 and begin to grow taller at 12. Boys generally begin to gain weight at 13 and gain height at age 14.

Remember, all children are unique. Some children will grow at an earlier age than the average child. Others will be older when they begin to show increases.

Besides growing bigger and taller, the maturing child gradually develops the bodily characteristics associated with adult males or females. While it's often hard to tell the difference between male and female 8-year-olds dressed in t-shirts and jeans, the difference is generally clear in 12-year-olds.



Preparing for change

The first menstrual period is an important event for girls. Parents and their daughters should prepare for it. Girls' feelings about menstruation often depend on the parents' feelings. Parents who believe menstruation is a normal part of growing up can help their daughters accept it without difficulties.

Today, girls as young as nine or 10 may begin to menstruate. So, during the elementary school years girls need to learn what will happen to their bodies and how to take care of themselves. A girl who understands there is no "right" age for starting to menstruate will have fewer worries about whether she is early or late. Also, a menstruating girl should learn that she is able to become pregnant.

Boys also may be concerned about bodily changes. For, example, the appearance of facial and body hair may be viewed as a sign of manhood. A boy who is maturing later than his friends may question his masculinity. Nocturnal emissions, or "wet dreams," are as common and normal for boys as sneezing, but they may be worrisome to a boy who has never been told about them. Parents can prepare their boys for these physical changes by offering timely and accurate information.

Children are sexually mature before they are capable of entering into adult relationships. In our society, films, television, music and magazines emphasize sexuality. Teens may be confused by their sexual feelings that seem to be acceptable to society, but aren't acceptable to their family and spiritual leaders.

Teens need your support, understanding and encouragement as they make decisions about their sexual activity. If you have trouble talking to your child about his or her sexuality and mature, responsible sexual behavior, find someone else who can. This person could be a teacher, physician, nurse, school counselor or other informed adult.

Physical changes can cause emotional upsets

The hormones that cause physical changes can also affect your teen's moods. One teen said "Some days I'm up and other days I'm down. The way I feel doesn't seem to have much to do with what's going on around me. Sometimes these feelings really scare me."

The fact that different parts of the body grow at different rates can also cause teens to feel embarrassed, awkward and scared. Hands and feet, for example, grow faster than legs and arms. Think how you would feel if your feet grew from their present size to three sizes larger in the next six months. Facial features also grow at different rates. A young person who is convinced that his or her nose is too big for his or her face may be correct.

Talking to teens about the effects of physical changes on emotions can sometimes help them cope with their stress. Knowing that different parts of the body grow at different rates may help reassure your teen.

Nutritional needs and eating disorders

Because teens are growing so rapidly, they need to eat food containing protein and calcium. Yet teens can be finicky eaters and often rely on fast foods high in fats and sugars.

Obesity may become a health problem for some teens. Although active teens may burn off the calories taken in through their diet, teens who aren't active may take in more calories than their bodies use. This may lead to obesity. The best way for teens to control obesity is to increase their activity level. They also need to eat nutritious foods such as lean meat, fish, fruits and vegetables, and few foods containing fats and sugars.

It's normal for teens to gain additional body fat during puberty, yet some girls and boys may become fearful of this change and develop eating disorders. Anorexia, an eating disorder characterized by obsession with weight loss, tends to occur during the teen years or even earlier. Teens with anorexia eat only small amounts of food, and may weigh their food, document food intake and count calories. Teens with anorexia tend to exercise for long periods of time to burn off calories,

Bulimia, another eating disorder, also may occur during the teen years. Bulimia is characterized by eating large amounts of food in a short amount of time, then purging the food by vomiting or taking laxatives. It may be difficult to identify a teen with bulimia because his or her weight may be average. Teens may have both bulimia and anorexia.

In addition to anorexia and bulimia, some teens may develop *orthorexia*, an obsession with correct eating. Here the teen takes healthy eating to such an extreme that it causes imbalance or ill health. For example, they may start to limit fat and then no fat and then no sugar and then nothing with salt and then nothing that is not organic until very few foods meet the criteria of their perfect diet. Unlike the bulimics and anorexics who usually try to hide their illness, orthorexics flaunt their eating habits and look down at those who do not meet their standards as being inferior.

For more information about the physical changes in teens, see the following UNH Cooperative Extension publications: *Adolescents and Sleep*, *Living with Your Teen: Teen Depression and Suicide*, *Living with Your Teen: Alcohol and Drug Use*, *Living with Your Teen: Teen Depression and Suicide* and *Living with Your Teen: Teen Sexuality*.

A Guide to the Physical Changes of Teens

Girls	Approximate Age	Boys	Approximate Age
Ovaries increase production of estrogen and progesterone	9	Testes increase production of testosterone	10
Internal sex organs begin to grow larger: uterine muscles grow, vaginal lining thickens and external sex organs grow	9 ½	Testes and scrotum grow larger	11
Breast “bud” stage; breasts develop to full size many years later	10	Pubic hair begins to appear; final pubic hair pattern may occur during late teens or 20s	12 ½
Public hair begins to appear; it will take 3 to 4 years to establish an adult pattern	11	Penis begins growing larger about a year after testes begin to grow	11 - 14
Weight spurt begins	11 ½	First ejaculation; sperm count generally low	13
Underarm hair	About 2 years after pubic hair appears	Weight spurt begins; may include development of breast tissue which disappears in 1-2 years	13
Oil and sweat-producing glands; acne may appear	About the time underarm hair appears	Peak height spurt; an increase in height occurs late in the sequence of puberty	14
Peak height spurt	12	Peak muscle and organ growth; shoulders become noticeably broader	14 ½
Menarche (first menstruation) . Early menstruations are generally anovulatory, that is, eggs have not been released from the ovaries	12 ½	Voice lowers	About the same time as penis growth
First ovulation	13 ½	Facial and underarm hair appears	About 2 years after public hair appears.
Final pubic hair pattern	15	Oil and sweat-producing glands, acne.	About the same time as under-arm hair.
Full breast growth	16	Final pubic hair pattern	18

Sources: Goldstein, B. (1976). Introduction to human sexuality. Belmont, CA: Star, as cited in Steinberg, L. (2002). Adolescence. Boston: McGraw Hill
 Berger, K. (1988). The developing person through the lifespan. New York: Worth.

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