



Puberty information for parents of girls with a disability

Puberty is a period of time in early adolescence when a young person goes through physical changes that lead to their body being capable of reproduction.

These changes are caused by chemicals produced by the body called hormones. Girls with a disability go through puberty the same as other girls. This is usually between the ages of 9 and 16, although some may start earlier while others may be delayed. Puberty is considered complete when a girl is physically capable of getting pregnant.

Your daughter's experience of puberty and her capacity to reproduce may be affected by her disability. Talk to your doctor or health professional for further information so you are prepared to answer your daughter's questions and help her through this stage of her development.

You should start talking about the changes your daughter will experience during puberty *before* they actually occur. It's a good idea to talk to her teacher to find out what sexual health and relationship education is being taught at school to reinforce this at home. Also talk about changes that occur during puberty for boys, so that she will understand it's something that everyone experiences.

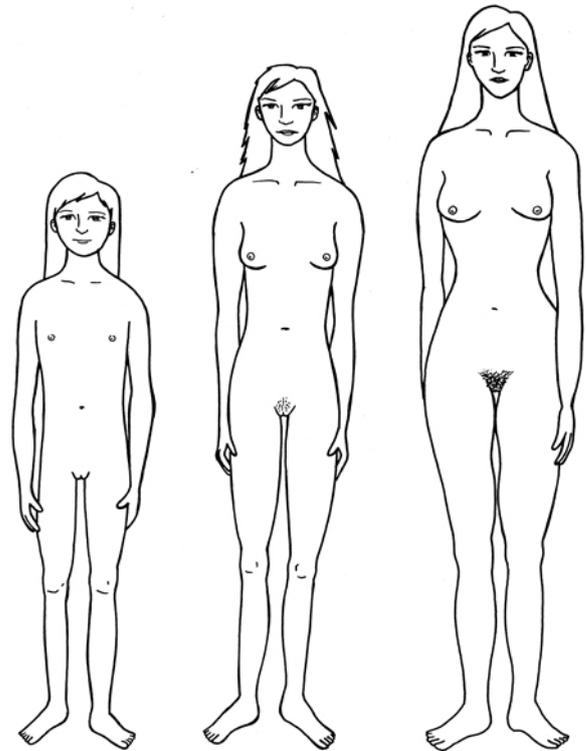
Changes for girls

The hormone oestrogen circulates in the blood and triggers the start of many changes, including:

- growing taller
- hips growing wider and curvier
- breasts developing (some girls may experience soreness or tenderness)
- hair growing in the pubic area
- underarm and leg hair gets darker and longer
- oily skin
- increased sweating
- acne
- mood swings
- vaginal secretions
- menstrual periods

Private body parts

Use terms that you are comfortable with to explain private body parts to your daughter, so that you have a common understanding; however, it is best to teach the correct words rather than slang terms. As your daughter learns about her reproductive parts, she should also be taught about private parts, especially the genital area, anus, breasts, mouth and lips.



No-one should touch these private parts without her permission. It should also be explained that she can not touch anyone else's private parts without their permission. This is a good time to reinforce concepts of public and private spaces and remind her that the genital area, breasts and anus should be covered in public.

Personal care

When discussing puberty with your daughter take the opportunity to reinforce hygiene and cleanliness. As the body starts to produce more oils and sweat there is an increase in body odour, so care in washing and changing clothes regularly become more important. If your daughter has a carer who looks after intimate personal care, you should be aware that she may feel embarrassed about having her private parts touched or seen. You or a carer should ask permission on each occasion that intimate care is provided.

Periods

Girls should ideally learn about periods before their first period so they do not fear menstrual blood. Simply put, a period is when blood comes from inside a women's body through the vagina. Explain that the blood is clean and it doesn't mean that she is hurt.

Your daughter should be reassured that it is a normal, healthy part of growing up and it's something that only happens to girls. You may find it useful to explain what a period is using a simple diagram or an illustrated book.

Some girls have their first period as young as nine years while others can be 16 years. It's difficult to tell exactly when periods begin, but most girls will experience increased vaginal discharge and other signs of physical development. Her periods may be irregular at first, but they should settle down. She should have a period about once a month which will last for a few days.

Your daughter will also need information about pads and tampons and how they are used. Demonstrate how they are used on a doll. You should reinforce that she can only change her pad or tampon in a private place, like the bathroom with the door closed. Remind her that the pad will need to be changed every three to four hours. Give your daughter clear instructions on how to dispose of the pad. Make sure she washes her hands before and after. It's also important to discuss what she needs to do if she has to change her pad or tampon when she is not at home.

Some girls experience premenstrual syndrome or period pain. Symptoms can include mood swings, irritability, sore breasts, cramps, back pain and fluid retention. These can be helped with gentle exercise, a healthy diet and medication. Natural therapies can also be helpful. Consult a health professional for more information.

When talking to your daughter, it's a good idea to explain that periods are private. She should only talk about them with people she knows and trusts. Also discuss information on sexuality and explain that now that she has her period she can get pregnant if sexually active.

Masturbation

It's natural and normal for girls to explore their bodies and to masturbate. It's a safe way for them to discover sexual pleasure. It's important not to make them feel guilty or ashamed, but to talk to them about where and when it is appropriate and personal hygiene. Always respect their privacy and knock before entering the bedroom or bathroom.

Emotional changes

As your daughter goes through puberty she is also likely to experience emotional changes, which can affect the way she thinks or acts. She may:

- want more independence
- want to spend more time with friends
- be attracted to men or women
- have mood swings
- become more sensitive or aggressive
- want to challenge adults

It can be a difficult time for your family. Try to stay calm and listen to your daughter's point of view. When you disagree, clearly explain why, express your concerns and try to compromise if possible. Also discuss your family's values and beliefs with your daughter so she has an understanding of what influences your views and opinions. It's important to communicate openly and honestly.

You can get more information on puberty and other sexual health issues by contacting SHine SA's Sexual Healthline or going to www.shinesa.org.au.

You can also go to the Hormone Factory website at www.thehormonefactory.com for lots of interactive information about puberty for young people and parents.

SHine SA contact details

East/West Primary Health Care Team

GP Plus Health Care Centre
64c Woodville Road, Woodville SA
Tel: 8300 5300
Clinic appointments: 8300 5301

Northern Primary Health Care Team

43 Peachey Road, Davoren Park SA
Tel: 8256 0700

Southern Primary Health Care Team

19–23 Beach Road, Christies Beach SA
Tel: 8186 8600

Workforce Development & Resources

64c Woodville Road, Woodville SA
Tel: 8300 5317
Email: SHineSACourses@health.sa.gov.au

Library & Resource Centre

64c Woodville Road, Woodville SA
Tel: 8300 5312
Email (Library): SHineSALibrary@health.sa.gov.au

Sexual Healthline

Available 9 am – 1 pm, Monday – Friday
Tel: 1300 883 793
Country callers (toll free): 1800 188 171
Email: sexualhealthhotline@health.sa.gov.au

Website www.shinesa.org.au

National Relay Service: www.relayservice.com.au
133 677 (TTY/Voice) 1300 555 727 (Speak & Listen)