



Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Health**
Public and Aboriginal Health Division

Girls & Puberty

Almost everything girls will ever need to know
about body changes and other stuff!

In this booklet, we've got together a heap of information so that you can be informed about the important stuff. And it will help keep you safe and happy and well.

PS: If you want to know what boys go through, have a look at the *Boys & Puberty* booklet.



Ella aged 13

Stella aged 13



“Puberty is a gradual thing and everyone goes through it.”

Is it just me, or have I arrived on a new planet?

Puberty is the word used to describe all the changes that happen when a child turns into an adult. This growth and development phase is also called adolescence. The changes you go through are preparing your body for reproduction (having children). Your body changes and the way you look at the world will likely change as well.

Puberty is a gradual thing and everyone goes through it. Puberty happens to you even while you are getting your homework done, swimming at the beach, or going to the movies. It is the body's way of making it possible for you to have a baby later in life.

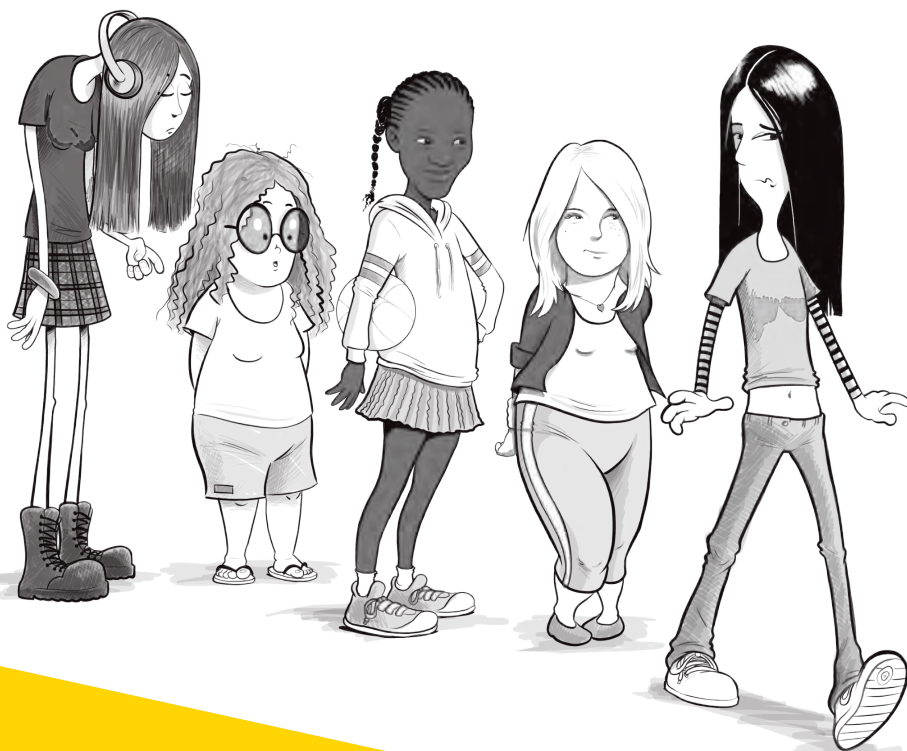
Whatever your sex and gender, you will experience the physical and emotional changes of adolescence. For most people, puberty will start between the ages of eight and 13, but don't worry if you haven't noticed your body changing yet; it will change when it's the right time for you – everyone is different.

Some young people might feel the changes happening to them to be a little weird, but the more you know about it, the easier it is to adjust to things.

Sometimes when you're in the midst of changes at puberty, it might feel as if there is no one to talk to. Want to know something scary? Parents often understand more than you think they do! Remember, they went through puberty too! If you don't want to talk to your parents, you could try talking to a trusted relative or friend. Saying things out loud can be a good way of getting things clear in your mind.

So you know all about the changes that happen to you during puberty? And why it's important to look after yourself? Most of this puberty stuff you have probably already picked up from books, movies, the classroom, the internet, your mates, your parents – but do you know the whole story?

Are there things you have wondered about ... but haven't dared to ask?



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THINGS THAT CHANGE

Your body changes in puberty to become the way it will be when you are an adult. You might gain some weight, just as you have done every year since you were a baby. You will also find changes happening to your body hair, your genitals and your breasts. *All of it is perfectly normal.*



Breasts

In most girls, the first sign of puberty is when breasts start to develop. You might be eight or you might be 13 when this happens. Either way, this age range is perfectly normal.

You may also find that your nipple area becomes more sensitive at the start of puberty when your breasts are developing. Breasts can also become tender before or during periods.

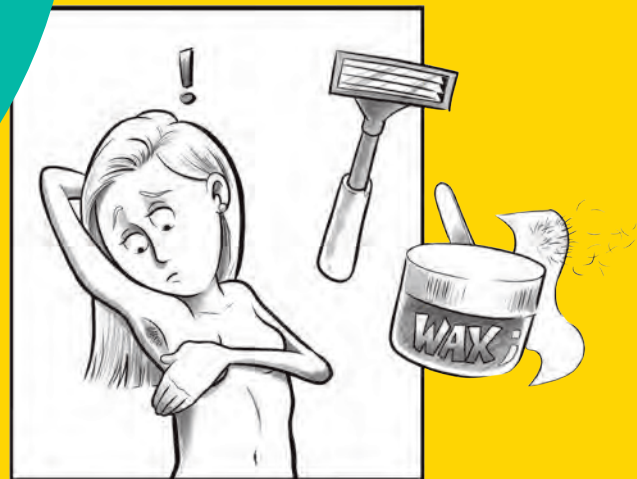
Breasts come in all shapes and sizes, just like people do. Some girls worry about the size of their breasts and think they are too big, or too small. Some girls worry about the shape of their nipples. There is no one right way for breasts to be. All breasts, whatever the size or the shape, are capable of producing enough milk to feed a baby if the time comes.

When should I get a bra?

There is no set time when it is right to start wearing a bra. It is a good idea to talk it through with a trusted older female first, then have someone experienced come with you when shopping for bras. That way you can make sure that you buy a bra with good support that will suit your needs, especially if you play sport.

“ You might be eight or you might be 13 when this happens.”

“There is no one ‘perfect’ shape. Women (and men) come in all shapes and sizes.”



Getting hips

Your pelvic region begins to alter during puberty so that your body will be able to bear children later in life and, during this process, you may notice your hips widening and your thighs becoming more rounded.

Have a look at the women in your family. Their body shapes are probably similar to the form your own body will take. You will see other bodies too, especially online, in magazines and on TV. Sometimes it's hard to avoid comparing your own body with those you see in the media and you may feel you are too tall or too short, too fat or thin. Most worries arise from comparison; there is no one 'perfect' shape. Women (and men) come in all shapes and sizes. If you are happy, healthy and comfortable with your body, then you will find it easier to be happy being you (for more information on this, see Body image, page 18).

Body hair

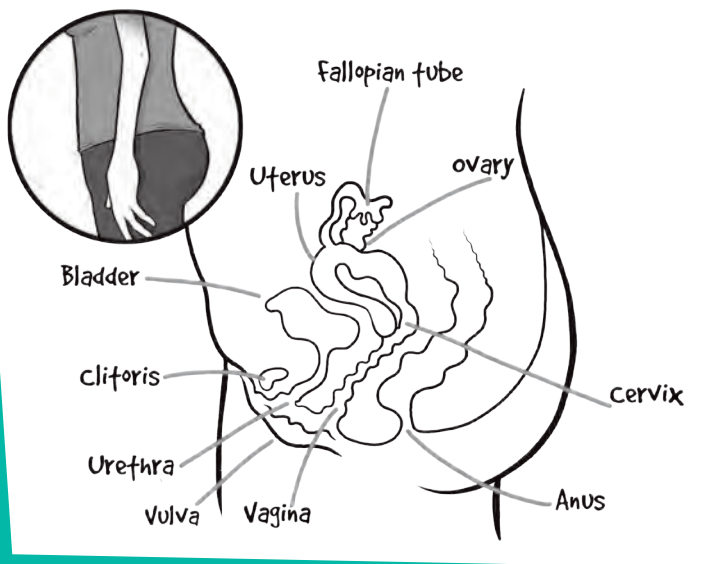
As you go through puberty, you will start to notice hair in your armpits, on your legs and in your pubic area. This will be fine and straight at first, and will become thicker and sometimes curlier as you get older.

Should I shave?

Some young women choose to shave or wax the hair in their armpits, around their pubic area and on their legs. There is no health reason for doing this. It is a matter of choice. You might like to talk your decision over with a parent or trusted adult before you do it. Avoid sharing razors with other people as it can pass on blood-borne viruses.

You might also find there is more hair on your arms and face than before. This is normal.

Hair growth will probably slow once your hormones have settled down. It is probably more noticeable to you than to anyone else, but if it is worrying you, there are safe ways of removing unwanted hair. Again, it's a good idea to talk about this first with a trusted adult.



“The vulva is the outside part of a woman’s genitals.”

A tour of the genitals (sex organs)

Your genitals are made of several parts, some of which are difficult to see. You can use a hand-held mirror to become more familiar with your own body.

The vulva is the outside part of a woman’s genitals. The vulva includes pubic hair, the inner and outer vaginal lips (labia), the clitoris and the openings of the vagina and urethra. The urethra is the tube which carries urine away from the bladder. The outer labia (labia majora) are the large fleshy lips which cover the vulva. The inner labia (labia minora) are the folds of skin that protect the entrance to the vagina and urethra. The inner labia may be covered by the outer labia. But it is also quite normal for them to extend outside. Every woman’s labia are different in shape and size.

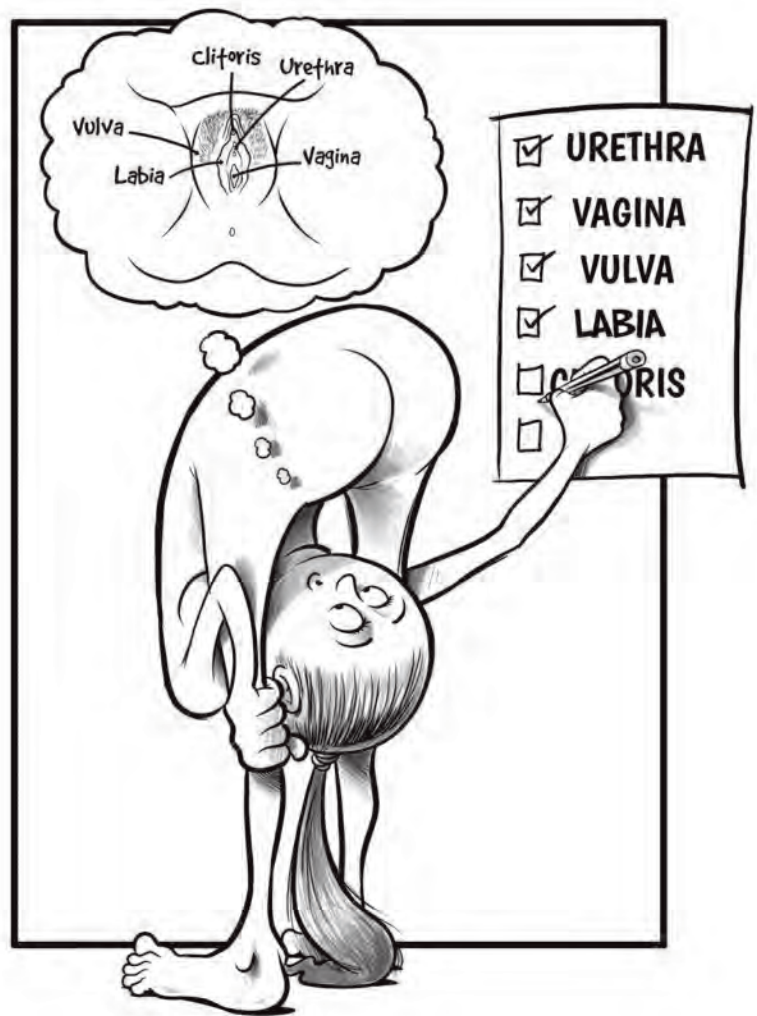
The clitoris is just above the urethra. The part of the clitoris that can be seen with a mirror is only the tip – about the size of a pea. It has many sensitive nerve endings. It also has a shaft which extends into the body. When you feel sexually excited, the clitoris fills with blood and swells. When the clitoris is stroked or rubbed, this pleasurable feeling can produce an even more pleasurable and exciting sensation called an orgasm.

The vagina is a stretchy internal tube made of expandable muscle. It is about 9 cm long and leads from the cervix to the outside of the body. When you get your period (or menstruation – see page 10), menstrual fluid (blood) exits your body through the vagina. The vagina is where the penis enters the body during sexual intercourse and when you are sexually excited, it is quite normal for the vagina to become moist.

The vagina is where a baby travels down from the uterus during birth.

Are my labia normal?

It's important to remember that everyone's genitals look different, and that normal vulvas come in many different shapes, sizes and colours. The labia will likely change in appearance during puberty and may become more visible. Some photographs of female bodies are deliberately 'photoshopped' or edited to make them not real representations and don't show the range of normal difference in female vulvas. If you are worried speak to a trusted adult.



Reproductive system

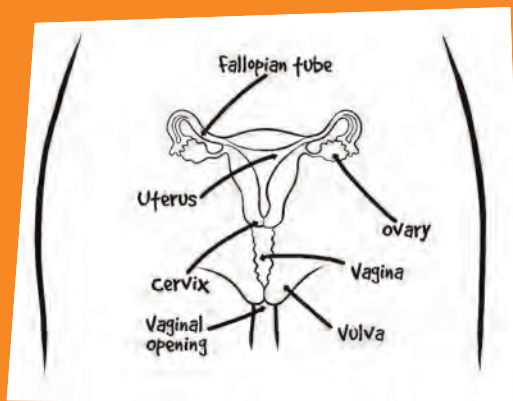
The uterus, or womb, is a hollow, pear-shaped organ. It can expand up to 50 cm in length during pregnancy.

Two fallopian tubes, one on each side, stretch from the ovaries to the uterus. These tubes carry an egg from one of the ovaries each month, gently moving it along to the uterus.

The ovaries are glands which produce female sex hormones and egg cells (ova). Each ovary is only the size of an almond, but contains 150,000 to 200,000 eggs. Every month, from puberty until you reach menopause (when your body stops being able to have babies), one of your ovaries will release one egg (sometimes more, but this is not common). Each egg is around the size of a pinhead. The time when an egg is released is called ovulation.

The bottom of the uterus is connected to the upper part of the vagina by the cervix. The cervix produces mucus. In the days leading up to ovulation, this mucus becomes clear in appearance, and elastic and slippery. During intercourse, this mucus helps sperm from the male reach the uterus and fallopian tubes.

If a sperm joins with the egg, this is called fertilisation. The fertilised egg travels to the uterus and when it attaches to the lining of the uterus, pregnancy begins.



Getting your period

What happens when I get my period?

Each month the uterus prepares for a possible pregnancy. The lining of the uterus thickens into a cushion of blood vessels, glands and liquid. If you become pregnant, this lining will be what nourishes a fertilised egg. If the egg is not fertilised, then the lining (mostly blood and some fluid) passes out through the vagina. This bleeding is called menstruation or more commonly referred to as a period.

How long does my period last?

A period generally lasts about five days. The first day of bleeding in each cycle is called Day 1. Sometimes you may bleed for as little as two days, or sometimes for as many as eight. This range is totally normal.

The body's process of preparing the uterus lining for a pregnancy and then disposing of the lining is called the menstrual cycle and takes around a month. Periods generally come every 28 days, but this can vary. Especially during the first two or three years, your period may be very irregular. You might have two in a row and then go several months without having a period at all. You will also find that your blood flow varies (it might be heavy, moderate or light) on different days of your period.

How old will I be when I first get my period?

There is no way of knowing when your first period will come. It will probably arrive sometime between the ages of nine and 15, but it may be earlier or later. Every girl is different. If you have not begun to menstruate by the time you are 17, talk to your doctor about it. Women usually stop having their periods between the ages of 45 and 55. This is called menopause.

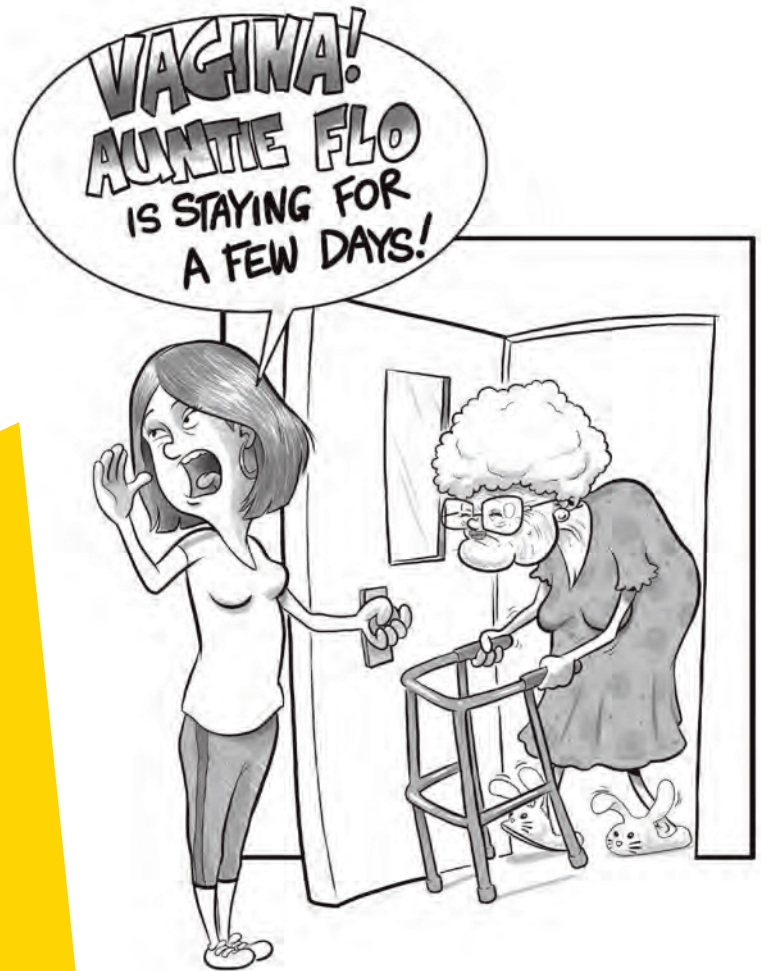
How can I plan for my period?

Pads and tampons are used to absorb period blood. Both can be bought at a pharmacy or supermarket and come with instructions.

Once you have your period, it's a good idea to keep some pads or tampons ready at home, in your school bag or locker. On Day 1, you might only notice a slight brownish stain on your underwear, but some girls start with more blood flow, so it is easier to cope if you're prepared.

If your first period starts while you are out and about, and you are not prepared, then you can temporarily make a pad from tissues or toilet paper and put this in your underwear. If you are at school when your first period comes, your teacher or school nurse will be able to help you. They are used to these things happening, so don't be afraid to ask them.

For environmental and health reasons, it's important not to flush pads or tampons down the toilet; put them in the sanitary bin usually provided.



“If you are at school when your first period comes, your teacher or school nurse will be able to help you.”

Should I choose pads or tampons?

You can choose to use sanitary pads, which you attach to the inside of your underwear, or tampons, which you insert inside your vagina. There are many different types of pads and tampons. It helps to find something that you find comfortable to use. You might want to talk over the options with a parent, older sister, cousin, school nurse or another trusted adult. Whatever products you choose, it is important to change them frequently – every three or four hours during the day. Your menstrual fluid has no odour until it meets the air. But a pad or tampon left in place too long can begin to smell and a tampon left in too long can lead to infection.



How do I get the tampon in?

You will find instructions for insertion in every tampon packet. Tampons are popular with many girls because they allow you to do everything you would normally do, including sport. There is a big range of tampons to choose from, including some with applicators – a plastic extending device which helps you to insert them. There are also several 'slim' versions of tampons. When a tampon is properly inserted, it can't be felt at all.

Wash your hands before and after inserting a tampon. Handle the tampon as little as possible. Find a position in which you are comfortable, such as squatting, or sitting on the toilet. Using a hand-held mirror can help you see what you are doing. Insert the tampon gently, leaving the string hanging out for easy removal..

If you use tampons, you must change them frequently. Though it depends a bit on your blood flow, they should be changed three to six times a day. If a tampon is left in for longer than eight hours (like when you are sleeping), the tampon absorbs too much of the vagina's protective fluid, and leads to a small chance of getting a serious infection called toxic shock syndrome (TSS). TSS causes sudden high fever, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, headache, muscle pain and rash. For this reason it is a good idea to use a pad, rather than a tampon, at night.

How do I get the tampon out?

A tampon won't slip out if it is placed beyond the muscles at the entrance of the vagina. It can't get lost inside you, either.

Don't forget to take one tampon out before putting another one in. Always remove the last one when your period is finished.

Are there some things I can't do when I have my period?

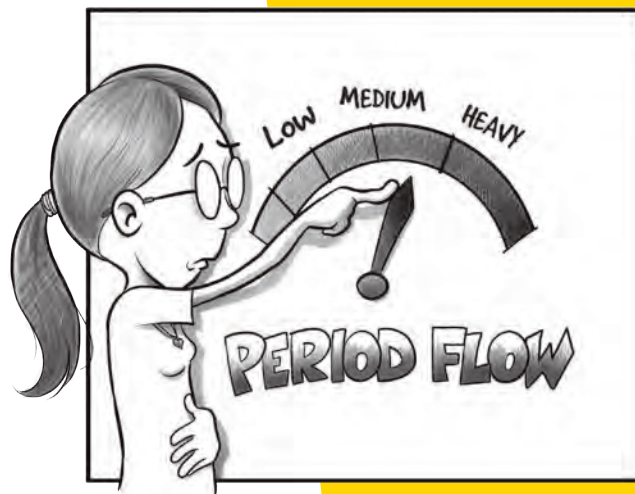
When you've got your period, you can do everything you normally do: run, ride, play sport, dance. If you swim, it's best to use a tampon. But if your period is heavy, or if you feel uncomfortable and you don't want to be active – don't. It's up to you. You should shower, have a bath and wash your hair as usual. In fact, the sweat glands are more active during menstruation, so you might notice you get sweatier than normal! If your bleeding is so heavy it stops you from doing normal activities, then talk to your school nurse or a doctor.

Will I get period pain?

Just before a period begins, you might feel an uncomfortable ache in the stomach or pelvic area. This can last for the first 12 hours or longer. Some girls say they feel bloated and heavy at this time. Some girls experience slight diarrhoea just before a period. Constipation is common too. If this happens to you, drink more water, eat extra fruit and vegetables as well as wholemeal bread and cereals. Try to exercise regularly.

Some women and girls experience cramping and stomach pain during their periods. Cramping may be caused by a hormone which causes the uterus to contract or tighten. If you do have pain during your period, try some stretches or other exercise, or curl up with a heated wheat bag or place a hot-water bottle on the painful area. If this doesn't work, it is possible to take pain relief. Talk to a parent, doctor or the chemist about what kind of relief will be appropriate for you.

You may also find yourself feeling more emotional, or moody, in the days before your period. These physical and emotional symptoms are together called pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS). Not every girl experiences these symptoms, and some girls might experience some symptoms but not others. They soon disappear after your period starts.



“When you've got your period, you can do everything you always do: run, ride, swim, play sport, dance.”

Other vaginal fluid

During the days of your menstrual cycle when you are not bleeding, the cervix still produces secretions or discharge. This is a small amount of fluid which keeps the walls of the vagina clean and slowly leaks to the outside. This fluid usually dries to a creamy yellow colour on your underwear.

You might notice differences in these secretions at different times of your cycle. As we discussed previously, for example, the mucus will become clear in appearance in the days leading up to ovulation. Sexual excitement also produces vaginal secretions. This is normal and healthy.

Do I need to keep my vagina clean?

Vaginal fluids help the vagina to be self-cleaning, so you don't need to wash inside the vagina and you don't need to use perfumed sprays. It is best to avoid plastic-backed panty liners for everyday (non-menstrual) use as they don't allow air to circulate. This can create a hot, moist breeding ground for bacteria and may lead to infection.

When should I worry about vaginal discharge?

If you have a continuous, heavy vaginal discharge this might be a sign you have an infection. For instance, a thick white discharge with a funny smell is a symptom of thrush. When you have thrush, the first thing you notice is vaginal itching. Thrush is a very common condition and it can be treated easily. Some other infections can also cause vaginal discharge. If you have a discharge that is not normal for you, or if you experience any sores or itchiness in your genital area, then you should see your doctor immediately.

“You might notice differences in these secretions at different times of your cycle.”



Sexual feelings

As your body changes during the course of adolescence, you may notice changes in how you feel physically and emotionally. These feelings help to prepare us for adult life, relationships, marriage, having sex and making babies.

It is quite normal to suddenly experience strong feelings, or crushes, for certain people, of the same or opposite sex. These feelings may remain private, or you may choose to confide in a friend, or express your feelings to the person directly.

Bear in mind that speaking your feelings aloud can put you in a vulnerable space. If your feelings are not returned by the other person, you may feel exposed and rejected. Or, if they are reciprocated, you may find yourself in an exciting new friendship or relationship.

It's also completely normal to not have these feelings at this stage.

What if someone gets a crush on me?

You may find that someone feels strongly about you but that you don't return these feelings. Try to treat this person with respect and kindness. Be honest and clear about your feelings.

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Eat right and exercise

With all these monumental changes in your body, it is important to look after yourself well.

If you give your body the fuel it needs to grow, and regular exercise, you will be giving yourself the best chance to feel good.

“Choose something active that you enjoy – that way you’ll keep doing it.”

What’s good?

- A well-balanced diet. Include lots of fresh fruit and vegies and plenty of water.
- Exercise! If you don’t enjoy sport, try hitting the dance floor (or the lounge room) with friends. Ride to school, take your dog for a walk, or get out on your skateboard. Choose something active that you enjoy – that way you’ll keep doing it.

What’s not?

- Fatty foods, fried foods and sugary foods (e.g. pastries, biscuits, chips, lollies).
- Stay away from crash diets. They don’t work.
- Being a couch potato.



Pimples and acne

In puberty your body is a hormone-producing machine. The production of new hormones also affects your oil-producing (sebaceous) glands and your sweat glands.

Pimples are caused by over-activity of the oil-producing glands. These glands lie just under the skin. They produce sebum, the natural oil that keeps your skin supple. During puberty, your hormones make the oil-producing glands grow bigger and produce extra sebum. This sebum is often thick and flows slowly, so it tends to clog the pores, causing pimples.

When pimples become very inflamed, a more severe condition called acne can develop. Some teenagers are troubled by pimples and/or acne for several years and may need treatment.

How can I look after my skin?

Frequent, gentle washing with warm water and a mild soap or face wash can help. Dirt doesn't cause acne, but washing can get rid of excess sebum. You may also find that certain foods such as sugary and fatty foods make your pimples worse. Cut down on these. Eat lots of fresh fruit and vegies and drink plenty of water. Try to avoid touching or squeezing pimples as this can make them worse or cause scars. If your skin is really bothering you, then you should see your doctor, as medical treatments are available to treat severe cases of acne.

Sweat

Once you reach puberty, you may also find that you sweat more.

Remember that sweating is a normal human function. The healthiest of sportspeople lose buckets of sweat out on the sports field!

By itself, sweat does not have much of a smell but bacteria which live on the skin can create a smell called body odour or BO.

To avoid body odour, wash your body daily, especially the underarm area, using mild soap and warm water. Change and wash your clothes often. It helps to wear loose-fitting clothing, made from natural fibres. An underarm deodorant will be useful, too. Body odour is one of the many things that people get needlessly anxious about. If you bathe and wash your clothes regularly, it is very unlikely you will have a problem.



“Eat lots of fresh fruit and vegies and drink plenty of water.”

Body image

As you get older you may become more aware of your body and the way you look. A usual and common feature of puberty is to worry about the way you look and compare yourself with those around you.

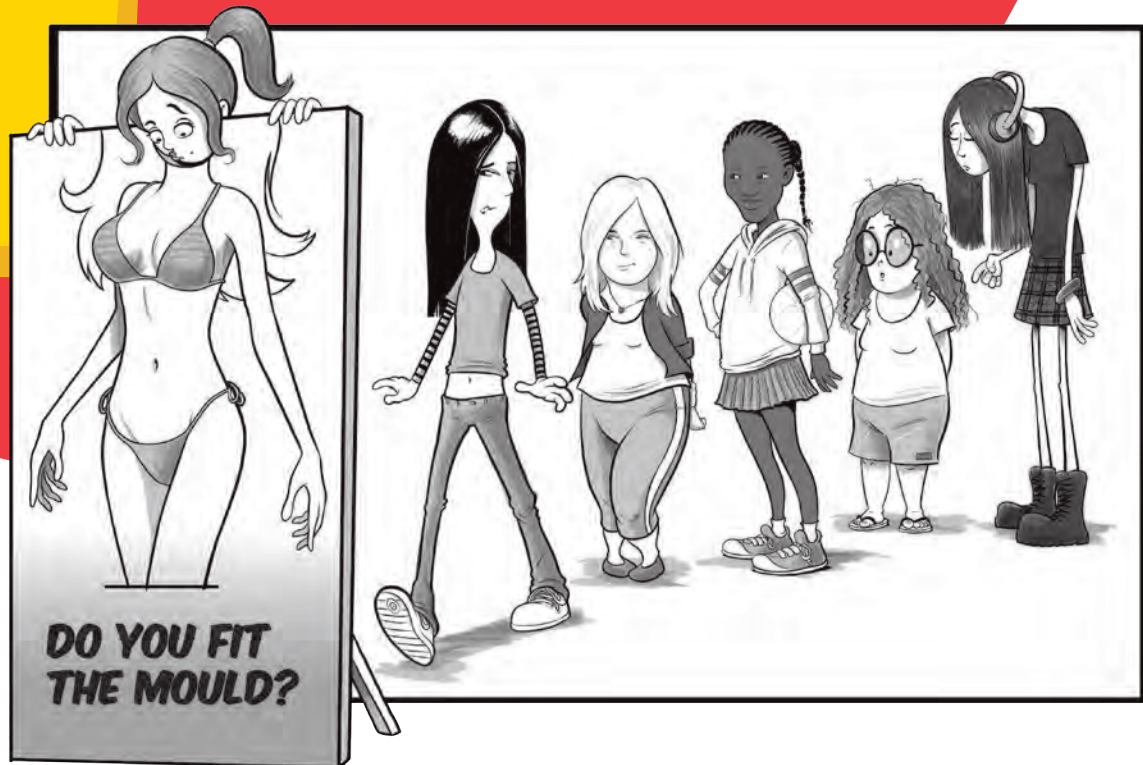
The world around us communicates all kinds of things about what the 'perfect body' is supposed to look like. Of course, there is no perfect body! But we are bombarded by images on TV, movies, advertisements and social media.

Look around at your family, friends and people you see on the street. In reality, people come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The images you see on social media and on TV have typically been selected, altered and sometimes touched up to create unrealistic, flawless looking people.

It can be a bit confusing to work out who you are and what you want to look like. Have fun finding your own personal style, appreciate qualities in yourself (and others) other than appearance, and celebrate the fact that we are all different and unique!

For more information go to:

- **Kids Helpline**
1800 55 1800
- **The Butterfly Foundation**
www.thebutterflyfoundation.org.au



Mental wellbeing

As well as changes happening to your body on the outside, there are changes happening on the inside, too.

Hormones can make us feel euphoric and excited or a bit moody and emotional; everyone has their ups and downs (even adults – but you already know that!). It is as important to take care of your mental wellbeing as it is your physical health.

The good news is that, like physical changes, the potentially worrying aspects of mental health such as anxiety or depression can be dealt with and managed too. There are plenty of things you can do to help yourself, like eating well, getting enough sleep, exercising, taking time to relax if you are stressed, and being socially active and involved in your community. Sometimes you might not be able to solve a worry on your own. Don't be afraid to ask a trusted adult if you need help. The sooner you get some help, the sooner things can improve.



For more information go to:

- **Headspace**
www.headspace.org.au
- **Youth Beyond Blue**
www.youthbeyondblue.com
- **Kids Helpline**
1800 55 1800

“Have fun finding your own personal style, appreciate qualities in yourself (and others) other than appearance, and celebrate the fact that we are all different and unique!”

CONCLUSION

Puberty is a time of many changes, both physical and emotional. Some of these changes are exciting, others are daunting. Don't forget that there are adults around you who can help you through the tricky times.

When you emerge at the other end of puberty, you will be well on the way to becoming an adult.

If you want some useful information and advice about relationships, love and sex, look out for the booklet ***Relationships, sex & other stuff***, available from teachers and school nurses.

Flip the booklet over
if you're interested
to read what boys
go through.

