

What Is Puberty?

Puberty is the period of time when a person's body starts changing from a child to an adult. These changes happen both on the outside and inside, and can also affect feelings and emotions. Puberty lasts for years with the changes happening slowly.

This guide aims to give young people information on what to do (and what may happen) if there are concerns that puberty is not starting or progressing as expected.

Puberty for girls	Puberty for boys
• Breasts grow • Pubic and under arm hair grows • Periods (menstruation) start. This is usually around 2 years after breasts have started to grow	• The testicles and penis get bigger • Pubic and underarm hair grow as well as facial hair (beard and moustache) • The voice becomes deeper • Muscle mass increases

What usually happens with growth during puberty?

As long as there is no medical reason or condition why they can't, boys and girls will grow taller during puberty (a 'growth spurt'). Girls will have their growth spurt earlier in puberty whilst boys have their growth spurt later. Girls usually stop growing around 1-2 years after periods started. Boys will usually stop growing later than girls and the timing will differ depending on when puberty starts and how it progresses.

When should puberty start?

Puberty starts at different times for different people.

- Girls usually start with small, disc shaped bumps (called 'breast buds') under the nipples between the ages of 8 and 13 years old.
- Boys usually start puberty between 9 and 14 years old. The first sign is when the testicles start to get bigger.

This age range means that some young people will change and grow earlier and some will be later than their friends.

At what age is puberty delayed?

If a girl hasn't started showing signs of puberty by 13 years old (or has signs of puberty but not started periods by the age of 16 years) or a boy has no signs of puberty by age 14 years, it's time to go and talk to a local General Practitioner (GP). The doctor (GP), or nurse, might suggest seeing a specialist, called an Endocrinologist, who understands how bodies grow and change through puberty.

Delayed puberty can run in families and this is called 'constitutional delay'. This just means puberty is starting later than usual, but it will still happen. Delayed puberty is more common in boys than girls.

Sometimes other things can delay puberty like:

- Being very active in sports
- Being underweight
- Having other health conditions
- Having other hormone deficiencies
- Genetic reasons (changes to genes which can lead to problems with puberty)

Talking to a doctor/nurse

It's normal to feel shy or awkward talking about puberty, but doctors/nurses are there to help. They will have talked about puberty lots of times before with other young people. The doctor/nurse will ask about the concerns and maybe a few questions about general health.

How does the doctor/nurse know if puberty has started?

The doctor/nurse will usually ask questions to find out if there's been any changes like getting taller or growing hair in new places. They will check height and weight and sometimes they'll do general checks on things like listening to the heart and chest and having a feel of the tummy. They may also want to look at how much the bones are growing by doing an x-ray of the left hand and wrist (bone age x-ray). Sometimes blood tests will be needed.

A pubertal examination is a way for a doctor/nurse to see how someone's body is changing as they get older and whether a person is going through puberty the way they should. The doctor/nurse will need to check under the armpits and the pubic area for any hair growth.

For a girl, the doctor/nurse might gently feel the chest to see if there are any signs of breast buds developing and may request an ultrasound scan of the pelvis to see what changes are happening inside. This is a scan of the tummy like women have when they are pregnant.

For a boy the doctor/nurse will use an orchidometer to measure against the size of the testes:



The bead that has the number 4 on it signals the start of puberty and number 10 is usually when a boys' growth spurt will start. The doctor/nurse will need to gently touch the testes but it will be quick and shouldn't be painful.

Who will be there during the examination?

A parent or carer could be present during the pubertal examination but they don't have to be. The doctor/nurse may ask a chaperone to join the examination – this will be another healthcare professional who is there to ensure that the person being examined is ok and to safeguard the doctor/nurse. It's possible to request one if the doctor/nurse doesn't.

It is a private examination and it's important that it's made clear what is going to happen. Healthcare workers will be trained in how to do the examination and it should only be carried out as needed. It is possible to say no to the examination however, the doctor/nurse will not be able to move forward with any treatment if it's needed.

Sometimes, medical or nursing students may be in the room to learn. The doctor/nurse should always ask if that's ok and it's always fine to say no. If no option is given for them to leave it is ok to request that they are not there for the examination.

Can delayed puberty be treated?

There is treatment available and this may differ depending on the cause of the delay. If the doctor/nurse says that treatment is needed to start puberty it's usually done by giving:

- Oestrogen for girls. This comes as a tablet to swallow or a patch to be worn on the skin under clothes.
- Testosterone for boys. This is usually given as an injection once a month for a few months or some hospitals offer a gel that is put on the skin.

These treatments start with a small dose and slowly increase over time to copy what the body would do on its own. There might not be visible changes to see straight away but it's important to keep going with the medication as prescribed. The doctor/nurse will talk through any possible side effects of the medication.

How common is delayed puberty?

About 2 out of every 100 young people have delayed puberty. It can make people feel sad, worried, or alone. Some young people may have:

- Low self-esteem (not feeling good about yourself)
- Low confidence
- Anxiety or depression

Sometimes, young people may be bullied or feel like they are falling behind at school or in sports. These feelings can also affect families, so it's important to get support.

Where to get help

These websites can help young people who are feeling upset, worried or angry:

- www.kooth.com
- www.youngminds.org.uk

Both offer private support and online chat if that is preferred to face-to-face discussion.

Further information

The Child Growth Foundation (CGF) provides expert information, advice and support. If you have any questions regarding the information contained in this factsheet, or any other queries, please get in touch with our friendly team, through our Support Line* contact details below.

Emailing: support@childgrowthfoundation.org

Calling: 020 8995 0257

Visiting: www.childgrowthfoundation.org/supportline

By scanning the QR code



**By contacting the Child Growth Foundation Support Line, you are providing consent for us to collect, process and store your data to provide you with the information or services you are contacting us about, in line with our Support Line Privacy Statement and our charity's Privacy Policy at: childgrowthfoundation.org/privacy*

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Disclaimer

We have taken every care to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this resource. The information enclosed should not be used as a substitute for the advice from a clinician, GP or other healthcare professional.

Feedback

Your feedback helps us to ensure we are delivering information to the highest standard. If you have any comments or suggestions, please contact us at info@childgrowthfoundation.org or on 020 8798 2139.

Funding

The CGF is an independent charity that relies entirely on the generosity of individuals, groups and organisations to continue our work. If you have found this resource helpful, please consider becoming a member, fundraising for our charity and/or making a donation at:
www.childgrowthfoundation.org/donate

Want to help others?

If you've been through delayed puberty and want to share your story, you can get involved! You can email our nursing team and/or join the volunteer team of Youth Ambassadors. Our Youth Ambassador Programme is for young people and young adults aged 16 to 25 with experience of a growth condition or concern who want to support other young people. Please note you can join without sharing your personal details publicly, such as your photos, name, diagnosis etc.

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