

## **Bill Spring - Writing Sample**

### **Guide to Puberty, written for the pre-teen audience of the PBS Kids website “It’s My Life”**

#### **Introduction: Whole Lotta Changin’ Goin’ On**

When it’s time for a caterpillar to grow up, she forms a protective chrysalis, hangs from a tree branch for a few days, and emerges as a full-grown butterfly. Within minutes she flies into the sky, a confident adult ready to take on the world and make butterfly babies.

Young humans have to go through a lot of changes to become adults too, but it takes a lot longer than a few days, and we don’t get to hide ourselves away in a shell while it happens. Our changes happen gradually, and out in the open, while we go about living our lives.

If you’re a tween, you’re probably getting ready for a period when you’ll grow up a lot... a period that brings some of the most important changes to your body and mind that you’ll experience in your whole life. This very special time is called PUBERTY, and it will bring changes in your height, your body shape, your skin, your body hair, and your private areas. Basically, puberty is a transformation, and it can be every bit as magical and wonderful as that caterpillar becoming a butterfly.

The word “puberty” makes some people laugh, but what the word actually means can make a lot of people frightened, or at least nervous. But there’s no reason to be scared, especially if you know what to expect.

Think of puberty as a journey from a shore called childhood to one called adulthood. It’s a long trip, and it isn’t always easy, but armed with knowledge, you can sail smoothly through the waters of change... or at least make sure that you know what to do when the sea gets a little rough.

First up: **Puberty: The Basics**

## **Puberty: The Basics**

### **What is Puberty?**

Puberty is a time in your life that brings lots of growth and lots of change. It's the process of changing from a kid into an adult, even though you won't really be all the way grown-up when it's over.

Basically, it's a time when your body becomes **sexually mature**. Girls turn into young women, and boys turn into young men.

By the time puberty is over, your body will be bigger and more "adult looking," and there will be more noticeable differences between you and someone of the opposite sex. Your **reproductive system** will start working, preparing you for the day, many years in the future, when you might decide to have children of your own.

### **What Causes Puberty?**

**Hormones** cause puberty. These are chemicals produced by glands in your body that tell the different parts of your body to change and mature. If you're baking a loaf of bread, you add yeast to the dough, right? The yeast is a special ingredient that makes the dough rise. Without it, the bread would be flat. Hormones are kind of the same. Your glands add them to your body- like a special ingredient- so that you can grow up. Without these hormones, you'd still get older, but you'd stay a kid in many ways.

In girls, puberty is controlled by the hormones **estrogen** and **progesterone**.

In boys, puberty is controlled by a hormone called **testosterone**.

### **When Does it Happen?**

Puberty does not begin on a specific date, like, say, your tenth birthday. It's different for everyone. There's a pretty wide range of ages for kids to start going through puberty, but most kids will start noticing the changes somewhere between 9 and 15.

This means that in sixth grade, a kid sitting at one desk could be well into puberty, while the kid at the next desk could be two years away from starting! The first kid might look fairly "adult," while the second kid still looks like a, well... kid.

The important thing to remember is that it's not a race. There's no shame in being the first in your class, and there's no shame in being last. Puberty happens when it happens, and every kid is on his or her own schedule. The important thing is to understand what's going on so that it doesn't take you by surprise or confuse you.

Puberty also has different schedules for girls and boys.

Girls usually start puberty when they are 8 to 13 years old.

Boys usually start puberty when they are 10 to 15 years old.

This is why people often say that girls “mature faster,” or accuse tween boys of being “so immature.” It’s also why girls in this age group sometimes stand several inches taller than their guy friends.

### **How Long Does it Last?**

Again, it’s different for every kid. Some girls and guys develop quickly, taking just two or three years to go through most of puberty’s changes. For other kids, the various stages of puberty will take longer, perhaps four or five years. The important thing to remember is that puberty doesn’t happen all at once. It’s a slow, gradual thing, and it includes a lot of changes.

What kind of changes? Well, our next section covers a big one! Click here for [\*\*Let’s Get Growing!\*\*](#)

## Let's Get Growing!

You may have heard your parents talk about an older sibling who's going through a "growth spurt," or is "growing like a weed." You may even have heard something like, "I just bought you those pants two months ago! Now you're saying they're too short?"

What's going on here? Growth is going on here. Puberty changes the size and shape of your body- you get bigger and taller, and your body begins to look more "adult" and less "childlike."

Don't worry that you'll wake up one morning and be too big for your bed... you won't grow that suddenly. But you will be growing pretty fast, maybe even as much as 4 inches in a single year... or even more!

The growing you'll do in puberty is very important, because when puberty ends, you'll be standing at your adult height. That's right! You've been growing taller since you were born, but puberty is pretty much the final act for height. You could be four feet tall when you're 12, and be closer to six foot when you're 16! This may sound shocking, but just imagine all the great clothes shopping you'll be able to do as you keep growing out of your old stuff!

As you get taller, you'll also be getting heavier, or generally "bigger." Your body will also be changing shape.

### Growth in Girls

If you're a girl, your growth spurt will make you look more feminine, or "womanly." You'll not only get taller, but your butt, hips and thighs will get wider, so you start to have a curvy shape. You might gain fat a little faster than you gain muscle, and this is totally, totally normal, because women, on average, have more body fat than men do. Don't freak out and go on a crash diet, because this is a normal part of puberty for all girls. Girls' breasts will also grow, and for more on this important topic, see **The Breast Years of Your Life** in the **Girls Only** section.

### Growth in Boys

For guys, the growth spurt will have a more masculine effect. As you get taller and gain weight, your shoulders will gradually get broader and you'll slowly add muscle, so you appear more "manly." And speaking of manly, there will also be growth going on in your private areas. For more about this, see **Below The Waist: It's a Guy Thing** in our **Boys Only** section.

So when can you expect to do all this growing?

If you're a girl, you'll probably go through a major growth spurt between 9 and 13, give or take a year or so.

If you're a boy, your growth spurt will probably come a little later, between 10 and 16.

But the simple answer is: you'll be growing through every stage of puberty. Teens and adults are bigger than kids, so a lot of what puberty is about is adding height and weight, and getting a more "adult body." That's why adults are called "grown-ups." Because they've grown up. And puberty is your time to grow.

Quick! On to the Next Bit! **It's About Zits!**

## **It's About Zits**

One of the more annoying changes during puberty happens to your skin. That's right... we're talking about acne, pimples, zits, spots... or whatever kids in your town call them. Those little bumps and marks on your face that get you all worked-up and worried about how you look.

Nobody likes them, but almost everybody gets them. Zits are the pits, but acne is just something you have to "face" during puberty.

## **So What's Going On?**

Well, the same hormones that are busy slowly turning you from a tween into an adult are having a few yucky side effects.

Most girls and guys going through puberty get acne because the puberty hormones can make the glands inside their pores (those tiny holes in skin) start making too much oil. Hair follicles (where a hair grows out of your skin) get blocked by dead skin cells, and bacteria grows. The bacteria makes your skin erupt into pimples. These are usually on the face, shoulders, arms, back and chest. They can look red, white, or black.

Guys tend to have more acne than girls do, because their skin makes more oil.

Acne can cause a lot of stress and embarrassment, especially for kids who get it first, or get a bad case of it. It's important to remember that acne isn't caused by anything bad you did... it's just something that happens because of puberty. It's also important to remember that you're not alone... millions of kids are dealing with acne, and pre-teens and tennagers have been going through it for thousands of years.

## **How Long Does It Last?**

There's no telling. Some kids with acne have clear skin after a year, while others keep having break-outs for many years.

## **Are There Things That Make Acne Worse?**

**Yes.** Here are some:

**Irritation.** Squeezing or digging at your zits, or getting rough when you wash your face, can make acne worse.

**Greasy Skin Stuff:** Oily sunscreen, cheap or oily make-up, and oily hair products or skin lotions can all make acne worse. Talk to your doctor or school nurse about which products you should use on your skin and hair.

**Intense Sunlight:** Wear a hat, stay in the shade, or find a good, non-oily sunblock. Lots of sun can make acne worse.

**Stress:** periods of anxiety or stress can sometimes make acne worse. Learn to manage stress, and your complexion might look better!

**Periods:** Girls sometimes have acne trouble when they get their periods. This is normal. You just need to be aware of it, so you can take care of your skin during “that time of the month.” For more on periods, check out [Period. Question Marks?](#) in our **Girls Only Section**.

### **Are There Things That Make Acne Better?**

Absolutely. Here are some things to try:

**Medicate.** Drug stores carry a lot of products to help you fight acne. These range from creams that you rub on affected areas to pads that you use to wipe your face. In many cases, these products can help keep breakouts under control. Make sure to follow the directions on the package so you don’t use too much.

**Cover Up.** It’s very tempting, especially for girls, to just use make-up to cover zits. This can help hide your acne, but you have to be careful, because some kinds of make-up can actually be part of the problem. Lots of make-up is made with stuff that’s **comedogenic**, meaning that it can clog your pores and make your acne worse.

If you want to use make-up, make sure it’s **non-comedogenic** (won’t clog pores). Another good word to look for is **hypo-allergenic**, which means that the make-up won’t cause other skin reactions. Try to avoid really cheap make-up, because it’s more likely to be bad for your skin.

**See a Professional.** If your acne seems particularly bad, or if drug-store products aren’t working, you can ask your folks to make you an appointment with a **dermatologist**- a doctor who specializes in skin. He or she will talk to you about all the latest and greatest acne treatments and medicines that you can only get from a doctor. The dermatologist might prescribe pills or cream, or might have you come to the office for special skin treatments.

### **Don’t Stress.**

Remind yourself that you’re not the only person going through this. If you look around your school or neighborhood, you’ll probably see lots of other kids your age with pimples.

If they’re coping, you can too. Look at it this way: things are easier than when your parents went through puberty. Thanks to modern medicine, tweens and teens have more anti-acne options than ever. And here’s something cool: less stress, by itself, can help make your skin look better too!

### **Zit Myths**

**Myth:** Junk food, like fried stuff or sweets, causes zits.

Truth: What you eat, or don't eat, probably has nothing to do with getting zits. Studies have shown that your diet doesn't have much effect on acne. So go ahead and have potato chips once in awhile (but remember that your health depends on good nutrition!) For more about healthy eating, click [HERE](#).

**Myth: Dirt causes zits.**

Truth: Acne comes from the inside, not the outside. Your hormones are causing changes that lead to pimples, and it has nothing to do with dirt you get on your face. You should always wash your face, of course... but getting a little dirty won't lead to zits.

Next, we tackle a sticky subject. Are you [Ready for Sweaty?](#)



## Ready for Sweaty

What smells? If you're going through puberty, it might be you. As you enter puberty, you will probably start to sweat more than you used to, and more sweat can mean more body odor, or "B.O." You might notice that you're starting to get wetter and smellier when you work out or play sports, or simply when it's warm out.

### What's Happening?

More sweat, and stinkier sweat, are a normal part of puberty. It happens to all kids as they get older - boys and girls. It's because of those puberty hormones again. The hormones are affecting your sweat glands, and your sweat glands are making chemicals that sometimes make you smell. There are lots of sweat glands under your arms, so your armpits might be one place where you're a bit stinky.

### What Can You Do?

Sweating is normal, and it's good for you. It helps cool you down when you're hot, and it can also happen if you're nervous or anxious. If you're worried that your sweat is stinky, or that people might notice, there are some easy fixes:

**Take a Shower.** If you don't shower every day, puberty is probably the time to start. Washing well with soap and hot water can get rid of any smell that's built up on your skin from sweating. You might want to shower after exercising or playing sports, too. You'll smell better, be cleaner, and feel refreshed.

**Try Deodorant.** Next time you're at the drug store or supermarket, ask your parents to buy you some deodorant. Deodorant comes in many forms: solid stick, roll-on, gel, spray, and so on. It's kind of like perfume, because it can help to cover up the smell of sweat. You usually apply it under your arms, where you sweat the most. It isn't always necessary for all kids, to use deodorant, but it can help you feel confident if you think your sweat is a little smelly.

If you think that you sweat A LOT (big wet spots that show up on your shirt and stuff like that), you can try using **antiperspirant**. This is a kind of deodorant that has a special ingredient to block some of your sweat. Don't use too much, or use it too often, though. Remember: sweating is a good thing. It keeps you cool and healthy.

Next, your mind is on our minds, with: **Brain Changes, Strange Changes.**

## **Brain Changes, Strange Changes**

Those puberty hormones that are gushing through your body are affecting nearly every part of you, and that includes... your brain! Puberty can be a time of changing emotions and new kinds of thoughts. You might think that you're going a little crazy.

Stay calm. You're not going crazy. You're just starting to grow up mentally (how you think) and emotionally (how you feel). These changes are completely normal, just like the physical (body) changes are.

If you've started puberty, these are some of the things you might be dealing with, brain-wise:

### **Feeling Sensitive.**

Your body is changing quickly, and you feel weird about it. Maybe you're self-conscious, and worried if you're normal. You might feel extra-sensitive to criticism, or teasing, or just about everything. Little things might set you off. You might think that nobody understands you.

### **Intense Emotions.**

You've felt emotions before, but now you feel really **STRONG** emotions. Instead of just disliking something, you **HATE** it. Instead of liking something, you **LOVE** it. You were a little jealous before, but now you're **SUPER** jealous. There have been times when you were sad, but now you feel **TOTALLY DEPRESSED**. Your emotions have gotten more intense.

### **Mood Swings.**

Your emotions are stronger, and they also switch back and forth quicker than before. One second you're singing happily, and the next you're crying your eyes out. You might be playing well with your brother, and then you're suddenly screaming at him. These are called mood swings for a reason: just like on a playground swing, one minute you're up, and the next minute you're down.

**Unfamiliar Emotions.** Puberty also usually brings a whole new set of emotions you may have never felt before. When you were little, you probably thought members of the opposite sex were icky... but now you're starting to think different... and you're having romantic feelings. Hey, it happens. That's part of growing up. For more about this, see our topic on Crushes, [HERE](#).

**Conflict.** As you leave childhood and make your way towards adulthood, you may feel like you need to be independent... to control more of your life and make your own decisions. If you're going through puberty, you may be questioning your parents' rules and beliefs, and starting to form opinions that are yours alone. You want to be **YOU**, and

this can lead to conflict with your parents, friends, or just about anyone. Of course, it also leads, after a bunch of years, to you becoming a unique person: your grown-up self.

### **So, How Do You Cope?**

Some ideas:

**Remember That You're Not Alone.** Things always seem worse if you think you're the only one who feels bad, or who is dealing with challenges. Well, you're not. Lots of other kids are going through the same stuff.

**Read About It.** One of the best ways to get through tough times is to know exactly what you're going through. Read up on puberty, starting with this [It's My Life](#) article. Go to the library for books about puberty, or ask your doctor or school nurse for some pamphlets or booklets. Also check out the IML reading list [Great Books About Puberty](#).

**Depend on Your Friends.** Talk about what you're feeling with your trusted friends. They may be feeling the same way, or they may know how to help you. At the very least, they might offer support and understanding, or just listen to you... so you can get it all out.

**Talk to an Adult.** It can also help to talk to a parent or guardian who may remember what going through puberty feels like. Guidance counselors, school nurses, and doctors can also listen to what you have to say and give you advice and support.

If you're having trouble with your emotions, you can also check out these IML topics:

[Depression: The Big Questions](#)

[Dealing With Anger: The Fire Inside](#)

Okay. It's time to choose. If you're a boy, continue reading with [Puberty: Boys Only](#).

If you're a Girl, check out [Puberty: Girls Only](#).

## **Puberty: Boys Only**

### **Mainly Manly: Muscles and Hair**

When you look at a boy, and then look at a man, what are the most obvious differences? Men are more muscular, and hairier.

As you go through puberty, the shape of your body, and your appearance will change a lot. You'll start out looking like a kid, and end up looking a lot more adult.

#### **Muscles:**

When you're very young, your arms, legs, and body might look pretty close to a girl sitting next to you in class. When puberty hits, this will change. Slowly, you'll start gaining more muscle in your arms and legs, your shoulders, and pretty much all over. You won't look like a body-builder overnight, and each guy will grow muscles at his own rate.

**Don't Push It.** It's important not to rush things. Don't start lifting weights every day or trying other ways to "bulk-up" before your body is ready. Give yourself a chance to grow into your body.

**A Note About Breasts:** During puberty, some guys notice that their breasts or nipples seem swollen or tender, or that they're starting to grow "man-boobs." This happens to a lot of guys. It's caused by all the hormones in your body and it's TEMPORARY. You are not actually growing breasts. It will go away.

#### **Hair:**

Everybody gets hairier as they go through puberty, and it's totally natural. Sometimes, growing hair where you used to have none is one of the first signs that you are starting puberty.

**Face Facts:** As you go through puberty, you might start to grow hair on your face. This usually starts with a soft, thin mustache on your upper lip. This hair will grow thicker as you get older. Your beard, which is the hair on your cheeks, chin, and neck, may also start to slowly come in.

**The Pits:** As puberty starts, you'll begin growing hair underneath your arms. It will probably be light and soft at first, but will get thicker as you get older.

**Down Below:** You'll also start growing hair between your legs, above and around your penis and on your scrotum (the sack of skin that holds your testicles). This is called **pubic hair**, because the area between your legs is also called your **pubis**. Again, this hair will grow gradually, getting thicker as you get older. It usually gets curlier and darker as you grow up.

**Arms and Legs:** Almost everybody has hair on their arms and legs. When you're a kid, this hair is hard to see, because it's so soft and light. During puberty, this hair will probably grow thicker and darker.

**Other Places:**

Towards the end of puberty, usually in the teen years, some guys may start growing hair on the chest, back, or butt. Most of the time this has more to do from the genes you inherit from your parents than it has to do with puberty. Some guys don't grow hair in these places until many years later, and some don't grow it at all.

**Color Questions:** the color and thickness of the body hair you grow during puberty will depend on a lot of things.

If you have dark hair on your head, your body hair may also be dark, so that it is more visible.

If you have very light blonde hair on your head, you may have very light and blonde body hair, but not always. Sometimes, blonde guys grow underarm hair or pubic hair that is brown. Your facial hair can also be a slightly different color from the hair on your head. This is normal, and you shouldn't be concerned about it.

**The No-Hair Scare:**

It's important to remember that each guy who's going through puberty will grow face and body hair on a different schedule, and it's not a race to see who can grow the most hair the soonest. One kid might seem very hairy in middle school, while his friend remains smooth until high school. Another kid might have plenty of underarm hair at 15, but no beard or mustache until he's 20.

**What Should You Do?**

You really don't have to do anything, because growing hair is a normal part of growing up. Some guys are happy when they start to grow a mustache or get body hair, because hair is seen as "mature."

If you don't like the look of facial hair and would rather have a "clean look," you can choose to shave with shaving cream and a razor, or with an electric razor. Usually, once you start shaving, the hair will grow back a little thicker and tougher than the hair that grew first.

Next: [Voice Changes: The Down-Low](#)

## **Voice Changes: The Down-Low**

Ever seen a big choir sing? You probably noticed something strange: the singers who handle the highest parts of the music are all young boys. This is because adult men have lower, deeper voices than kids do, and they can't hit the high notes. Why, you ask? Puberty!

For guys, one of the most obvious signs of puberty isn't something you see, it's something you hear. As you go through puberty, your voice will get lower in pitch, and start to sound more "grown-up." You might be tired of answering the phone and having people mistake you for your mom or your sister. Pretty soon, that won't be a problem anymore. You'll be talking like a man.

### **Why Does This Happen?**

Well, like a lot of puberty's changes, it's all about size.

Your voice comes from muscles in your throat called your vocal cords. Small vocal chords make high sounds, and bigger vocal chords make lower sounds. It's just like a guitar: a skinny string makes a high note, while a big, thick string makes a low note.

As your body grows during puberty, your vocal chords also grow. As they get bigger, your voice changes, and gets lower. Simple as that!

You might notice that, when your voice first start getting lower, it also sounds a bit squeaky, or strange. People might say that your voice is "breaking." This is normal. It just means that you're not used to your new voice, and are "growing into it." This new voice is still strange to you, and it may sound a little weird until you get the hang of speaking with it.

### **What Should You Do About It?**

Nothing. There's nothing you can do... your voice is going to get deeper, and that's just another part of puberty that all guys go through when they're becoming men. If you sing, you might have to switch from a soprano to a baritone... but that's a small price to pay for getting a manly, grown-up voice.

### **How About Them Apples?**

Puberty may bring another change to your throat: an Adam's apple.

### **What is It?**

An Adam's apple is a bump or lump in the front of your neck. It looks like something is sticking out of your throat. Many guys grow Adam's apples when they go through puberty, but many don't. In some cases, girls can get them too, but most don't.

**Why Does This Happen?**

Your vocal chords are inside of your larynx, also called your “voicebox.” As your vocal chords get bigger, the larynx gets bigger too, and sometimes gets so big that it bulges out of your neck, making the lump of an Adam’s apple.

**Does Size Matter?**

Nope. Not at all. Some guys get big Adam’s apples, some get small ones, and some don’t get them at all. It’s just like having ears that stick out or lay flat, or having straight or curly hair. These are differences that come from your DNA (the stuff you get from your parents that makes you an individual), and everyone is different.

Next, we get a little personal with: **Below the Waist: It’s a Guy Thing**

## **Below the Waist: It's a Guy Thing**

Although it's a delicate subject, we can't talk about puberty without taking about your private parts, otherwise known as your reproductive system, or sex parts. Puberty is about changing from a boy into a man, and an important part of this change is going to happen "below the waist." This means changes to your penis and testicles.

### **Growing "Down There"**

During puberty, your penis and testicles will both grow bigger.

Your scrotum, the sac of skin that holds your testicles, will also grow bigger.

### **How Big Should It Be?**

A lot of guys worry about the size of their penises. The truth is, every guy is different, and you shouldn't waste time worrying. Penises come in a wide range of sizes, and there is no "right size" or "wrong size."

### **Erections**

As you enter puberty, you'll begin to have erections. Some boys call erections "boners" or "hard-ons." Your penis is usually soft, but when you have an erection, it will swell up, get longer, and feel hard.

**What's Happening?** Blood is flowing into the spongy tissue inside your penis, and making it get bigger.

**Why is it Happening?** Erections are absolutely normal, and they happen to all guys. During puberty, they can happen for no reason at all, just because your body is filled with puberty hormones. They can also happen if you're thinking about sex.

**What Should You Do?** Don't Panic! Your penis absolutely will not explode or pop. Erections are temporary. They usually don't last more than a couple of minutes.

If you remain calm, the erection will go away. Just breathe, and clear your mind. If you're standing up and you're afraid that someone might notice you have an erection, just casually hold something, like a book, in front of your pants. Chances are, it will go away soon.

### **Wet Dreams**

As you enter puberty, your testicles begin producing sperm. Sperm are tiny, nearly invisible cells that are an important part of reproduction, a.k.a. making children. The sperm are in a liquid called semen. Sometimes, when you're asleep, some semen will come out of your penis. You'll wake up to find that your pajamas or sheets are wet or sticky. This is called a "wet dream" or "nocturnal emission."



**What's Happening?**

Wet dreams are totally normal. They happen to almost all guys, and they are just the way that your body sometimes gets rid of extra semen.

**What Should You Do?**

Don't worry, and don't be embarrassed. You don't have any control over this, so there's no reason to get upset or feel guilty. It's just a normal part of growing up.

Some kids begin to wash their own laundry (pajamas and sheets) during puberty, because they're embarrassed about wet dreams, and don't want their parents to know. But, really, you shouldn't be embarrassed, because just about all boys go through this, and nobody is going to judge you. It's just another sign that you're becoming a man! But hey, don't let us stop you if you want to do your laundry... your folks will probably appreciate the help!

Remember: don't be freaked out by the changes going on below your waist. You're slowly changing from a boy to a man, and this means that your private parts are changing, too.

## **Puberty: Girls Only**

### **From Bare to Hair**

As a girl, you probably think a lot about your hair... the hair on your head. But when puberty starts, it's time to start thinking about hair in other places. Grossed out? Don't be. Everybody gets hairier as they go through puberty, and it's totally natural. Sometimes, growing hair where you used to have none is one of the first signs that you are starting puberty.

**The Pits:** As puberty starts, you'll begin growing hair underneath your arms. It will probably be light and soft at first, but will get thicker as you get older.

**The Bikini Area:** You'll also start growing hair between your legs, above and around the entrance to your vagina. This is called **pubic hair**, because the area between your legs is also called your **pubis**. Again, this hair will grow gradually, getting thicker as you get older.

**Arms and Legs:** Almost everybody has hair on their arms and legs. When you're a kid, this hair is hard to see, because it's so soft and light. During puberty, this hair will probably grow thicker and darker.

**Color Questions:** the color and thickness of the body hair you grow during puberty will depend on a lot of things.

If you have dark hair on your head, your body hair may also be dark, so that it is more visible.

If you have very light blonde hair on your head, you may have very light and blonde body hair, but not always. Sometimes, blonde girls grow underarm hair or pubic hair that is brown. This is normal, and you shouldn't be concerned about it.

### **What Should You Do?**

You really don't have to do anything, because growing hair is a normal part of growing up. But many girls feel that having body hair, especially under the arms, is not "lady-like." Girls can feel embarrassed, or feel that there's a lot of pressure to have bare armpits. If you feel this way, you have some options:

Razors:

Creams:

You don't really have to worry about the hair between your legs, because few people will see that part of your body anyway. But as you get older, and the hair gets thicker, you may feel embarrassed when you're wearing a swimsuit. The hair can sometimes peek out of the bottom of your suit.



## **The Breast Days of Your Life**

There's no doubt about it. Breast development is a very big subject in girls your age. In fact, for most girls, the very first sign of starting puberty is their breasts starting to grow.

## **Period. Question Marks?**

If you're like most girls, the single most important change during puberty will be when you start to menstruate, or "get your period."

It's an essential body change that tells you you're reproductive system- the system that will some day let you have children- is starting to work.

It's also a rite of passage- an important step towards becoming a young woman. Many cultures celebrate a girl's first menstruation as the start of a new phase of life.

But a lot of girls can get stressed or scared when they have their first period. This stress or fear can be much worse if the girl is confused about what's going on, or if she feels somehow dirty or guilty about it.

Having a period **is not dirty**, and **it is nothing to be embarrassed by or ashamed of**. It is normal, and it is natural. It's just part of what it means to be a girl or a woman.

Before we talk about how and why menstruation happens, you'll need to know a few terms:

**Vagina:** This is the opening between a woman's legs. It is surrounded by folds of skin that look kind of like sideways lips. These are called **labia**.

**Cervix:** This is a ring of muscle at the end of the vagina, sort of like a "doorway" into the uterus.

**Uterus:** also called the "womb," the uterus is where a baby grows and matures when a woman is pregnant.

## **What is Menstruation?**

Some time after you start puberty, you'll start getting a "period" every month, on average. During this period, blood and tissue (thick, dark stuff) will come out of your vagina.

## **When Will It Happen?**

A girl's first period can happen anywhere from about 8 years to 16. Once it begins, it will return about once every 28 to 32 days. In the beginning, your period might not be this "regular." You might skip a period, or have two that are only a couple weeks apart. In most cases, this will settle into a regular once-a-month cycle.

## **Isn't Bleeding Dangerous?**

If you have a cut or a wound, bleeding is dangerous. But the kind of bleeding you do during your period is normal, and is almost never dangerous. You will only lose a few ounces of blood when you menstruate... a tiny bit compared to the many quarts of blood you have in your whole body.

### **What Should You Do?**

Since you don't want this blood to stain your underwear or pants, you will use a **pad** or a **tampon** to stop the blood and hold it in place.

**Pads:** A pad goes outside your vagina. It usually has peel & stick tapes on one side, and you stick these to the crotch inside your underpants, with the other side of the pad pressed against your vagina. The pad will soak up the blood as it comes out.

**Tampons:** A tampon goes inside your vagina. It is about the size and shape of your pinky finger, and is made of a cottony material. It comes inside a special plastic or cardboard tube, and this is what you use to put it inside your vagina. The tampon will soak up the blood before it can leave your vagina. It will also expand a little, blocking the flow of blood. A little string hangs from the tampon and out of your vagina, so that you can pull the tampon out when you are done with it.

### **Is Every Girl's Period the Same?**

Nope. Not only do girls start their periods at different ages, and get them at different times of the month, but some get shorter ones (as little as 3 days) and some get longer ones (up to a week).

Also, some girls have "light" periods (as little as one ounce of blood), and others get "heavy" periods (as much as 3 ounces).

### **What Else Happens During Your Period?**

**Bad Moods.** Period hormones can make you feel moody, depressed, or give you mood swings.

**Cramping and Pains.** As your period starts, you could get cramping in your lower body, tenderness in your breasts, headaches, or body aches.

**Swelling and Bloating.** During your period you might seem a bit puffy or "feel fat." Your breasts might swell a little, and your clothes might feel tighter.

Like everything else, these symptoms will be different for each girl.

### **Why Does it Happen?**

Girls and women get periods so that, some day, they can get pregnant and have babies. Women's bodies contain thousands of tiny eggs or "ova" which, if fertilized, can grow into babies. Each and every month, one of these eggs travels into the uterus.

The uterus gets thick with blood and mucous to nourish and protect the egg.

If the egg is not fertilized, this blood and mucous is not needed, so it passes out through the vagina. The egg simply dissolves, and the next month, a new egg is released, and the whole cycle starts again.