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When Is Puberty too Early?

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Parents may wonder whether their child is moving into puberty too early. Many factors can cause your child's body to mature faster than others, but [Dr. Robert Benjamin, MD](#), a Duke pediatric endocrinologist, says most of these are beyond your control. Girls are more likely to experience early puberty than boys, for example, and African-American and Hispanic children often mature earlier than white children.

Understanding the signs of early puberty will help you to know when to seek help. Here, Dr. Benjamin explains what you need to know.

What Is Puberty?

Breast development is typically the first sign of puberty in girls; for boys it's testicular enlargement. Other common changes for boys and girls include growth spurts, increased body odor, pubic and underarm hair, and [acne](#). Boys may experience growth of their penis, small amounts of facial hair, and a deepening of their voice.

"We all recognize puberty as a major change, and one that we as parents experienced," Dr. Benjamin said, "but when and how your child's body matures toward adulthood can be different than it was for us."

When is Puberty?

According to the National Institutes of Health, puberty usually begins in girls between 8 and 13 years of age, and in boys between 9 and 14 years of age. Puberty is considered to be early in boys before age 8 and girls before 9 years old. This is sometimes called “precocious puberty.”

When Should You Contact Your Child’s Doctor About Precocious Puberty

“Most instances of early puberty don’t present a health risk to children, but it’s worth contacting your pediatrician in case your family doctor feels it’s important to run any tests,” Dr. Benjamin said. “It’s rare, but there are cases where early puberty can be a sign of something that needs treatment.”

Early Puberty Concerns in Girls

Some causes of early puberty in girls include [thyroid disorders](#), abnormal brain structure, exposure to radiation therapy, or ovarian cysts. Genetic conditions may result in early puberty and can be detected with testing. In 90 percent of cases in girls, however, there is no known cause.

Early Puberty Concerns in Boys

Early puberty in boys is more likely to be caused by an underlying disease. Causes of early puberty in boys are similar to girls, and include [thyroid disorders](#), abnormal brain structure, exposure to radiation therapy, and certain genetic conditions. It may also be caused by tumors of the brain, testis, liver, and/or adrenal glands.

Addressing Physical and Mental Changes of Early Puberty

Your child may have a noticeable growth spurt because of their early puberty, but one of its complications is an abrupt and early end of that growth, leading to short stature as an adult.

“If this is a concern, please see your doctor,” Benjamin said.

While your child’s physical changes may be a concern, it’s also important to consider their psychological needs. Children with early puberty are more at risk for low self-esteem, depression, and substance abuse. Your son or daughter may require counseling to help address the changes in their body and the effects of any treatments they receive. Your doctor will help you access counseling services.

Testing for Early Puberty

Your doctor will perform a physical exam to assess how your child’s body is maturing. Blood tests may also uncover hormonal changes. Your doctor may schedule an X-ray of your child’s hand and wrist to evaluate growth and bone maturity. Additional tests may include an ultrasound for girls to check for ovarian cysts, or a brain MRI for boys and girls to look for abnormalities.

Treatments for Early Puberty

In some cases, medication may be prescribed to stop or slow puberty. Medication to regulate hormone production may be administered through injections or through an implant under your child’s skin that releases medicine over time. Surgery is rarely needed to treat early puberty, unless it the cause is a tumor.

Can I Prevent Early Puberty?

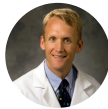
“Most of the time puberty starts because of genetic factors and can’t be altered by what we do as parents,” Benjamin said. “You can take some steps to minimize environmental causes of early puberty,” such as helping your child maintain a healthy weight and avoiding exposure to testosterone or estrogen that could be found in over-the-counter creams/gels, hair treatments, medications, and nutritional supplements.

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