

PUBERTY

Information for Parents and Carers

Girls and boys with Down's syndrome experience the changes associated with puberty at the same time and in the same order as other young people.

At any time after the age of 7, the pituitary gland starts to release sex hormones. Oestrogen in girls, Testosterone in boys. For girls this is on average, between the ages of 8 and 13, for boys it is slightly later, between 10 and 15 years.

Adolescents with Down's syndrome are often less emotionally mature than their peers at this age. This can mean that they find the physical changes harder to understand and cope with. In addition, there are the typical mood swings to consider, difficult for any young person and their parents to deal with.

Information about puberty needs to be given before the physical changes start to happen. Knowledge is power and having an idea of what to expect and why it is happening will help the young person to come to terms with the changes to their body and emotions.

Start talking to your child about these changes as soon as possible. Use visual aids such as books, videos, the Internet and even anatomically correct dolls to help you to get your point across. Prepare yourself!

Changes that will happen

GIRLS



- **Breast buds appear.** Slowly the breasts will start to develop.
- **One breast will often develop quicker than the other.** This is normal and they will even out eventually.
- **Pubic hair develops.**
- **Armpit hair develops.**
- **Periods start.** Periods are irregular for a while, but usually settle into a cycle after about a year.

BOYS



- **There is an increase in the size of the testicles and penis.**
- **Pubic hair develops.**
- **Armpit hair develops.**
- **The voice deepens.** This can happen overnight but is usually over a period of time.
- **The shoulders broaden and muscles develop.**
- **Facial hair appears.**

ALSO EXPECT: mood swings, assertiveness, anxiety, confusion, neediness, apparent self-centredness, self-consciousness, fatigue, growth spurts, wet dreams, erections, masturbation, crushes.

BE REASSURED: your child is progressing like any other child!

Other things to consider

Adolescence may be the time when your child becomes aware of being 'different' to other young people. The gaps between your child and their peers may become more obvious to everyone, including your child.

Helping your child to develop a sense of their own self worth and a positive image will ensure that they attain a good level of self esteem which will see them through life.

Hygiene is very important for all young people. Teach your child about the need to wash regularly, use deodorants, keep their hair clean and change their clothes regularly. Encourage them to be as independent as possible in this.

Adolescents with Down's syndrome tend to put on weight and need to learn about the benefits of a good balanced diet. Encourage them to take regular exercise. Remind them that doing this will make them look and feel great. They will also want to spend more time with their friends and have more opportunities to meet new people.

What can parents and carers do to help?

Talk about growing up

- Start talking to your child sooner rather than later.
- Plan regular short chats in a quiet place with no distractions.
- Use a range of materials to help you explain difficult concepts.
- Decide on the words you are going to use and stick to these.
- Tell other people what you are doing and what words you are using. Your child may ask them questions!
- Be positive. Reinforce that growing up and changing is natural and happens to everyone.
- At some point you will need to talk about sex and relationships. Your child has to understand why their body is changing.
- Your child will experience different feelings and sensations. Explain that masturbation is natural and feels good, but needs to be done alone in a private place.
- Teach your child about appropriate touch, by them and by other people.
- Teach them how to be assertive and to say no when something happens to them that they don't like.

Developing good self esteem:

- Use every occasion to tell your child how fantastic they are.
- Help them to choose up to date clothes and hairstyles and ask other young people what's cool!
- Respect your child's opinion.
- Allow them to make real choices and decisions and to act on these.
- Allow opportunities for independence and give your child some responsibility.

Down's Syndrome

SCOTLAND helping people realise their potential

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