

Adolescent Sexuality

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During adolescence, significant physical changes of a person's life occur as they transition from childhood bodies into fertile, adult bodies via the process of puberty, the beginning of adolescence. Puberty leads to both reproductive and sexual maturation occurring over the course of several years. The ages of the stages of puberty vary between the sexes and from person to person depending on genetics, body mass index, environmental influences and hormone levels.

Around ages 8 to 11, a female's production of the sex hormones estrogen and progesterone begins, but no external signs of change are noticeable. A female's first physical sign of the onset of puberty is the development of breast buds which generally occurs between ages 11 and 12, but can start as young as 8. During this time, females experience an increase in height and weight with most fat depositing in the hips and buttocks as they develop a more rounded figure like that of an adult. Along with these bodily changes comes the growth of pubic hair. Between 12 and 13 years, the vagina increases in size and may start to produce a clear or whitish discharge, which is a natural cleansing process. A female's first menarche often occurs, on average at the age of 12. By age 15, most females are ovulating monthly and have attained their adult physical features including fully developed breast and coarse pubic and underarm hair, and most have reached their full height.

On average, males begin puberty a year or two later than females. Around 10 years old, the male sex hormone begins production by converting the androgen hormone DHEA secreted by adrenal glands, to testosterone. The presence of testosterone causes the first physical change for males to occur which is the growth of the testes and scrotum which occurs between ages 12

and 13. During this time, males may experience a growth spurt and growing may continue throughout puberty and sometimes through their early twenties. Once a male reaches age 13 or 14, their penis has grown in length, dark, coarse pubic hair has appeared and their voice has begun to change and deepen. First ejaculation can occur anywhere between ages 11 to 17, but for most males it is around age 14 or 15 after the genitalia is fully grown. Nocturnal emissions, which are spontaneous orgasms during sleep that include ejaculation for a male is common during adolescence and can occur any time after puberty begins. Facial and underarm hair and the production of more oil in their skin is often experienced during this time. By age 17, most males have nearly reached their full height and have adult facial and body features including full facial hair and increased body hair.

Psychologically

Adolescence is full of not only drastic physical changes, but also immense self-exploration and discovery. Pre-teenagers and teenagers begin to develop a more complete sense of self including an understanding of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Some may question the dichotomy of traditional gender roles as they figure out where they belong. During this time, adolescents are often concerned with body image, social acceptance and interactions, sexual development, self-confidence, and sexual attraction. Teenagers are vulnerable to social criticism and internalizing emotional experiences, which could contribute to depression, anxiety, eating disorders or maladaptive behaviors.

One way adolescents begin to learn about their sexual selves in a safe and healthy way is through masturbation. Typically, frequency of self-stimulation increases during this stage of life because of sexuality curiosity and the influx in hormones being produced in the body. Other non-

coital expressions of sexuality such as kissing, hand-holding, and fondling, increase as well, but often determining how far to go can be problematic.

Sociologically

As adolescents begin to explore their sexuality, it can be very confusing. This confusion is perpetuated if they experience shame for self-stimulating or exploring non-heterosexual experiences. The development of their sexual identity is heavily influenced by social media, video games, access to internet pornography and other sexually explicit material, television and lyrics in music. Healthy sexual development involves learning ways to manage emotions concerning intimacy, sexual arousal and sexual attraction. It is important adolescents understand sex and sexuality are not shameful and exploration is a healthy part of development.

In recent history, the age of first sexual activity and intercourse have decreased. Sexual behaviors and experiences during early adolescence are often linked to risk factors such as drug and/or alcohol use, delinquency, and school-related problem. Additional risk factors of those engaging in sexual activities at a young age include low socioeconomic status, low self-esteem, limited sex education, and low level of parental education and supervision. Adolescents with access to more resources, strong academic performance, parental involvement, and adequate sex education involving contraception, sexuality transmitted diseases, consent and sexual health are more likely to have their first sexual experience at a later age.

Further Reading:

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