

# Chapter 5

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# Health Concerns of Girls



Sometime between the ages of 10 and 15, a child's body begins to grow and change into an adult body. These can be exciting and difficult years. A young person may not feel like a child anymore, but also not like an adult—their body is somewhere in between and is doing new things they are not used to. What makes it harder is when no one talks about the changes, so you do not know what to expect. This chapter describes these changes for you as a girl or someone who can become pregnant, explains how to stay healthy as you grow, and gives information to help you make decisions for a healthy life.

## Eating for healthy growth

One of the most important things a young person can do to stay healthy is to eat well. Bodies need enough energy, protein, vitamins, and minerals during their years of growth. Foods with calcium help bones grow strong.

In many places, girls are fed less than boys. Girls need as much food as boys, and getting enough to eat leads to less sickness, more success in school, and a healthier old age. People who can become pregnant need the right kinds of food to have healthy pregnancies and safe births in the future.

When a person's menstrual cycle begins, they begin to lose some blood each month. It is important to eat foods with iron to replace the blood lost and prevent anemia. For more information on eating well, see Chapter 11, "Eating for Good Health."



*Children who get enough to eat do better in school.*

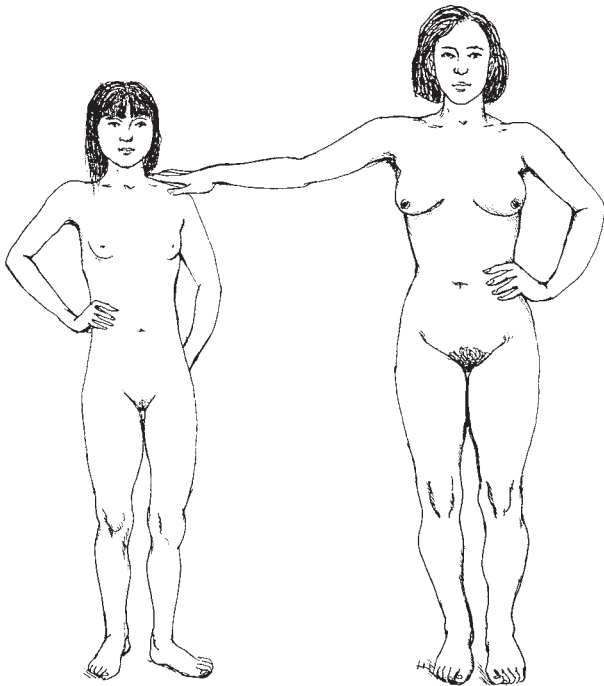
## Changes in Your Body (Puberty)

**A**ll girls go through changes in their bodies, but the changes happen differently for each girl. So do not worry if your body does not look exactly like someone else's, such as your sister's or friend's.

**Growing.** Your first change will probably be that you grow taller. For a while, you may grow taller than the boys your age.

**Body changes.** Besides getting taller, your body will begin to change in other ways. Natural *chemicals* in the body called *hormones* tell your body to make these changes happen.

### Changes in your body during puberty



- Your face gets oily and *pimples* or spots may grow.
- You sweat more.
- Hair grows under your arms and on your *genitals*.
- Your breasts grow. As they get larger, it is common for the nipples to hurt sometimes. One breast may begin to grow before the other, but they often become the same size over time.
- Wetness (*discharge*) starts to come out of your vagina.
- You start having menstrual periods.
- Your hips get bigger.



our reproductive bodies

► *Changes during puberty do not all happen at the same time or in the same order.*

**Inside your body.** There are other changes that you cannot see. The womb (uterus), tubes, ovaries, and vagina all grow and allow you to have a child. Whether or not you want to have children, after puberty your body will be ready to.

**What you feel.** These changes can make you more aware of your body. You may feel sexually or emotionally attracted to other people for the first time. You may also feel more understood and accepted by your friends than by your parents and family. It is common to feel strong emotions like joy, anger, sadness, or worry in the days before your menstrual period begins.

## YOUR MENSTRUAL PERIOD (MONTHLY BLEEDING)

Your menstrual period is a sign that you can become pregnant. Nobody can know exactly when they will have their first menstrual period. It usually happens after your breasts and the hair on your body start to grow. Several months before your first menstrual period, you may notice wetness coming from your vagina. It can stain your underclothes. This is normal.

You may be happy when you have your first menstrual period, especially if you know what to expect. Someone who was never told about it often worries when the bleeding starts. Most people with a womb and vagina will eventually get a period. Whether or not you want to celebrate having your period, do not let anyone make you think it is dirty or shameful.

### Caring for yourself during your menstrual period

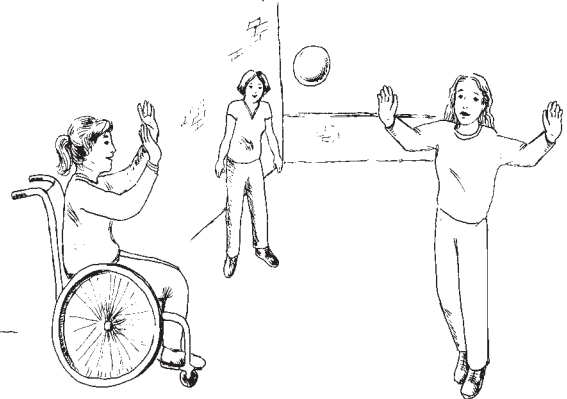
**Staying clean.** You can buy or make sanitary pads of folded cloth or wads of cotton to catch the blood as it leaves the vagina. They stay in place with a belt or by attaching to your underwear. Pads should be changed several times each day, and washed well with soap and water if they are to be used again.

You can also put something inside your vagina that you buy or make from cotton, cloth, or a sponge. These are called tampons. If you use tampons, be sure to change them at least 3 times each day. Leaving one in longer can cause a serious infection.

Wash the outside of your genitals with water each day to remove any blood. Use a mild soap if you can.

**Activities.** You can continue all regular activities, like going to school, work, play, and the local market and cooking meals.

*It is healthy to bathe and stay clean during your menstrual period.*



*Exercise may reduce the pain that can come with your menstrual period.*



your menstrual cycle



pad



tampon

## Changes that Can Lead to a Better Life



self-esteem

In many communities, girls grow up believing they are less important than boys. They are taught to feel shame about their bodies and resigned about being girls, and they learn to accept less education, less food, more abuse, and more work than boys. This directly hurts their health and makes them less able to fully develop or make decisions for a healthier life. In these ways, a community shows it does not value girls as much as boys.

The way a woman sees herself forms as she grows. If a girl learns to feel good about herself when she is young, she can develop confidence in her abilities to make her community better. All children are more likely to learn this when their families and community show them that they are valued.

When a community recognizes the value of each person, no matter their gender, girls in that community can grow up feeling they can use all their capabilities and make better lives for themselves and for their families and neighbors.



*Teacher, we could organize a health fair at school to show people how diseases are spread and how to stay healthy.*

*Recognizing and supporting their ideas and efforts helps girls feel pride and develop confidence.*

The way a community treats girls and women affects how families treat their girl children. For example, if a community believes that girls should learn skills, a family that lives there is more likely to want their daughter to go to school for as long as she can. But in a community where women are allowed to do only “women’s work” and are not allowed to become tradespeople or professionals, or even to participate in public meetings, families are much less likely to believe that their daughters need education.



low status of women

There are many ways to help girls feel better about themselves and to help their families and communities decide to make life different and better for all their children. On the next few pages are some ideas.

**Ways a girl can take responsibility for her life**

**Find someone who you think will listen and understand**—a friend, a sister, or another person in your community. Talk about your fears, problems, goals, and dreams for the future. Think of women who you respect and talk about why you admire them. Are there ways you can be like them?



**Help your community.** Making your community better can help you find your own strengths. When you and your friends agree there is a problem in your community, work together on a solution. You will all feel more confidence when you see the difference you made.

**Plan for your future.** Start by thinking about what you would like to happen in your life. What is important to you? What activities are you most happy doing? What are you good at? Talk to people who do the kind of work you think you would like to do. Ask to spend time with them to learn more about their work and how they came to do it.

Thinking about the future is not easy for girls whose lives are controlled by their families or their community traditions. You may feel frustrated if your dreams conflict with beliefs about what a woman should do in your community and family.



Try to find women in your community who lead the kind of life you want, talk to them about how they did this, and use them as examples when describing to adults your dreams, hopes, and plans for the future. See page 65 for ideas about how to communicate with your family.

## Decisions for a better future

You can work with your family and friends to make important decisions about your life.

**Education and training.** Education brings more opportunities, a better income, a sense of pride, and a happier and healthier life. There are ways you can learn to read, write and develop other skills even if you cannot go to school.

For example you can study at home, join a literacy program, or learn a trade from a skilled person (apprenticeship). When you have new skills, you have something special to give to your community, and you can better support yourself and your family.

Learning new skills gives you more choices in your life.



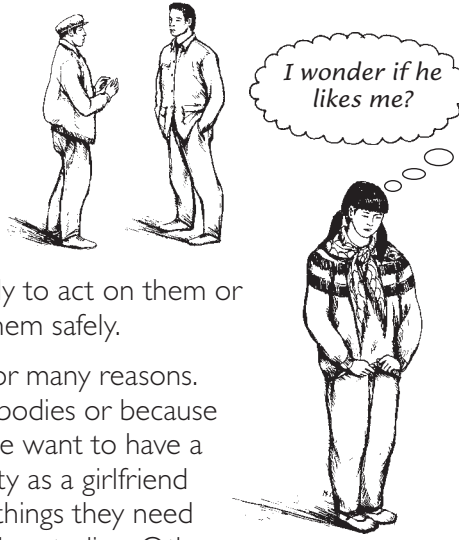
**Marriage.** Wait to get married until you feel ready. Try to finish school, find work, and be able to support yourself before getting married. Talk with your family or people you trust about how they can help you make this happen. This can give you the time and experience to learn more about yourself and what you want. It will also help you find a partner who feels the same way about life as you do.

**Pregnancy and children.** Your family will be happier and healthier if you wait to have children until you and your partner feel ready to care for them. If you are thinking about having a baby, consider: How will you and your partner fulfill a child's physical needs—food, clothes, shelter, schooling, and health care, as well as needs for attention, guidance, and emotional support? Will you be able to continue your education or work? Is your partner committed to raising a child with you? Do you have a support system that will help you?



Communities can organize ways for young people to learn about how their bodies work, including how to prevent pregnancy. This can be done at home, and programs can be held in schools, community meeting places, or places of worship.

Most young people begin to have loving or sexual feelings as they get older. Thinking about touching or being touched by another person in a sexual way is not unusual. But people often have these feelings before they feel ready to act on them or understand how to act on them safely.



Young women have sex for many reasons. Some do it to explore their bodies or because it brings them pleasure. Some want to have a baby. Some feel it is their duty as a girlfriend or wife. Some trade sex for things they need to survive, like money or a place to live. Others have sex because they think it will make someone love them more. Sometimes people make a girl feel that she should have sex before she is ready.

You can wait to have sex until you decide you are ready. Try to find a partner who you trust and feel safe with. Be sure you are both prepared for what could happen by having sex—both wanted and unwanted experiences. Know how to avoid unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and learn ways to prevent sexual violence. Sex is most enjoyable when it is something you choose to do and not the result of pressure from others.

For more information, see Chapter 13, "Family Planning," Chapter 16, "Sexually Transmitted Infections," Chapter 17, "HIV," and Chapter 19, "Rape and Sexual Violence."

## Deciding if You Are Ready for Sex

► Being able to choose your sexual partner and when and how you have sex, without fear or pressure, are all part of good sexual health.

► Most people have a lot to learn about what they like and what makes them comfortable when they have sex. You can learn from experiences that are good and ones that are not so good. See Chapter 12, "Sexual Health."

### Health risks of pregnancy at a young age

Most young bodies are not ready for a safe and healthy birth. Young people are more likely to develop pre-eclampsia, which can cause seizures during pregnancy. Because their bodies may still be too small for a baby to come out, pregnant people under age 17 are more likely to have long, difficult labors and blocked births. Without medical help, someone with any of these problems can die. Blocked births can also injure the vagina, causing urine and stool to leak (see page 370). Babies born to people younger than 17 are more likely to be born too small or too soon. If you are already pregnant, see a trained midwife or health worker as soon as possible so you can have a safer pregnancy and birth. For more information, see page 72.



### What you should know about having sex

- You can get pregnant the first time you have penis-in-vagina sex.
- You can get pregnant any time you have penis-in-vagina sex without using a *family planning* method (even if it is only once).
- You can get pregnant even if your sexual partner says no *semen* or *sperm* came out.
- You can get an STI such as *HIV* if you do not use a condom when you have sex with an infected person. And you cannot tell by looking at a person if they are infected.
- It is easier to get an STI, including *HIV*, if you are a “receiver” during sex. (A receiver has someone’s penis in their vagina or anus during sex.) It can also be harder to know when you have an STI. There might not be signs, or signs may be inside your body where you cannot see them



**Always use a condom for protection against STIs including HIV.**



### Having a relationship with limits on sex

Building a loving relationship takes time, caring, respect, and trust from both sides. Sex is not the only way of showing someone that you care. Having sex does not make people fall in love.

You can spend time together without having sex. By talking and sharing experiences you learn about each other—how you view life, decisions you would make together, what kind of partner and parent you would each make, and how you feel about each other’s plans for life. Touching each other (without having sex) can be satisfying by itself, and is not dangerous as long as it does not lead you to have sex when you do not want to.

**Talk with your partner.** If you are sure they are right for you, but you are not sure you want to have sex, talk about ways to wait. You may find that they are not ready for sex, either. If you respect each other, you will be able to decide together.

**Talk to your friends.** You may find that some of your friends are facing the same difficult choices. You can help each other find ways to have good relationships without sex. If it seems like many of your friends are having sex, keep in mind they may not be honest about their sexual lives. Some may say they have had sex when they have not, or say they have not had sex when they have. Young people often feel they must act like their friends to be liked or respected. This is called “peer pressure.”



pressure to have sex

## PROTECTING YOURSELF IF YOU ARE READY FOR SEX



When you decide you are ready for a sexual relationship, be prepared to protect yourself against pregnancy and infection. There are many ways to make sex safer. This means you have to plan before you have sex.

Before you have sex, talk about it. Let your partner know how important it is to protect yourself. If you find it hard to discuss, practice the conversation with a friend you trust.

*If your partner really cares about you, they will care that you begin to have sex when you feel ready. By pushing you, they may be showing you that they care more about their own needs than yours.*

Many communities have people trained to provide condoms and other family planning methods. Talk to them or ask a health worker where to get a method of protection. If you feel embarrassed to ask, find someone you trust to help you. Some family planning clinics have special services for teenagers and may have trained teenagers as peer counselors who can give you information.

Since you cannot tell by looking if someone has an STI, including HIV, sex is safer only if you **use a condom every time**. Someone who has discharge coming from their penis or a sore somewhere on it has an infection and can pass it to you if you have sex without a condom.

If you have sex and notice a new discharge from your vagina, sores on your genitals, or pain in your lower belly, you could have an STI. See Chapter 16, "Sexually Transmitted Infections."



family planning



safer sex

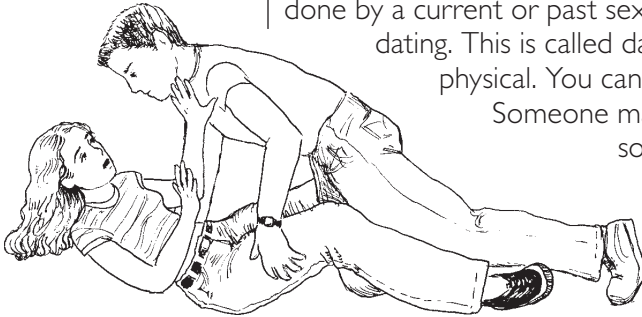
## Pressured or Forced Sex

### FORCED SEX WITH A PERSON YOU ARE DATING (DATE RAPE)

People all over the world, especially young girls and women, are forced to have sex when they do not want to. This is often done by a current or past sexual partner, or a person they are dating. This is called date rape. The force may not only be physical. You can feel pressure from words or feelings.

Someone may threaten you or say "please" or somehow make you feel guilty or ashamed if you do not have sex.

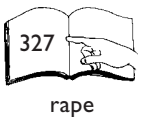
This is still wrong. **No one should be made to have sex when they do not want to have it.**



*If someone forces you to have sex when you do not want to, it is rape. See Chapter 19, "Rape and Sexual Violence."*

#### Prevention:

- If he wants to have sex and you do not, you can tell him you are flattered by his desire for you but that you are not ready. If you are afraid of being alone with the person, bring someone with you, or ask someone else to talk with him.
- If you do not want to have sex, you can **tell the person you are not ready**. If you are afraid of being alone with them, bring someone with you, or ask someone else to talk to them.
- **Say "NO" loudly** if you are pushed to have sex, and keep saying "NO" if you have to.
- **Move away** if you are touched in any way you do not like. Your feelings are warning you something worse may happen. **Make a lot of noise and be ready to run if you have to.**
- **Go out in groups.** In many places, young couples court or date in groups. You can still get to know someone and are less likely to be pushed into having sex when you are with others.
- **Go only to public places** where there are other people, and be sure you can get home if you want to leave.
- Plan ahead. Decide ahead of time how much touching is OK and how much will be too much for you. Talk to your partner about what you decide.
- Using alcohol or drugs changes your ability to make and keep to decisions, or protect yourself when your decisions are not respected. If you are going to use drugs or alcohol, use the information above to avoid situations that are less safe.



to prevent HIV right  
after exposure

## IF SOMEONE IN YOUR FAMILY TRIES TO HAVE SEX WITH YOU (INCEST)

It is never right for someone to touch you if you do not want to be touched. Family members, such as your cousin, sibling, or parent, should not touch your genitals or any other part of your body in a sexual way. If this happens, **get support**. Even if the person says they will hurt you or others if you tell, you need to tell an adult you trust as soon as possible. Sometimes it is best to tell someone outside your family, such as a woman teacher or religious leader in your community.



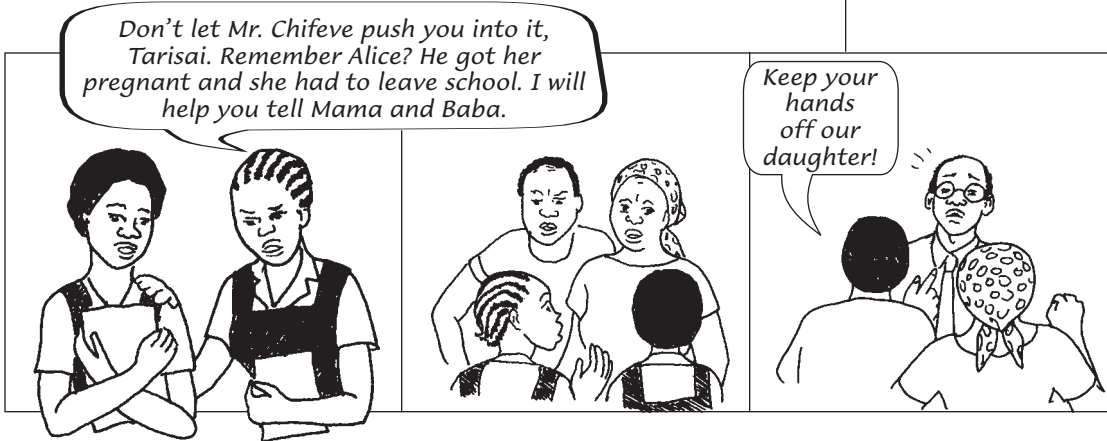
rape

## YOUNG GIRLS AND OLDER MEN

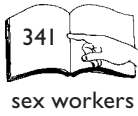
Some girls are attracted to older men. Going with an older man may seem very exciting, especially if he is well-known or important in your community, or if he has money. In some places, a man who buys his girlfriend many presents is called a “Sugar Daddy.” Often a girl who goes with an older man ends up feeling she was used for sex or treated badly, especially if the man is married or has other women.



Sometimes an older man can make a young woman feel more pressured to have sex than boys her own age can, especially if he has power over her.



**In many communities, more young women and girls are getting infected with HIV than any other group of people.** Girls who have sex with older men have more risk, because older men have usually had more chances to become infected with HIV. But getting HIV can happen with a man of any age.



### TRADING GIRLS FOR MONEY OR OTHER NEEDS

Sometimes a poor family will give a young daughter to an older man to pay a family debt. Or they may trade her for money or something the family needs.



Sometimes the girls are taken away to another town or city. They think they are going to work in factories, or as maids, but they are often forced to have sex for money. This is sex trafficking.

If you think that you or another girl in your community is going to be sold into marriage, or sent away to work, look for help from another adult. Perhaps an aunt or uncle, or a woman teacher can help.

### Unwanted Pregnancy

**Y**ou may be pregnant if you had sex and your menstrual period is late, your breasts hurt, you pass urine often or you feel like vomiting. See a health worker or midwife as soon as you can to find out for sure if you are pregnant.



Many young people get pregnant when they did not want to. Some of them are able to get the support they need from family and friends. For others, it is not so easy. If you are feeling trapped by a pregnancy you did not plan and you want to end the pregnancy,

**please be careful in the decisions you make.**



People all over the world die from trying to end pregnancies in dangerous ways. Your life is valuable. Learn about safe ways to end a pregnancy.

*Talk to someone older who you trust.*



Talking with your parents can be hard sometimes. They may want you to live by tradition when you feel that times are changing. You may feel that your parents do not listen or try to understand you. Or you may be afraid they will get angry.

Your family can love you without agreeing with everything you say. They may get angry because they care —not because they do not like you. Try to talk with them respectfully and help them to understand you better.

## Getting help from adults

### Ideas for better communication

- Choose a good time to talk, when your parents are not busy, tired, or worried about something else.
- Share your concerns, worries, and goals with them. Ask what they would do in your situation.



- Give them something to read or show them a picture to get them started talking. You can read a part of this book together if it is related to your problem.
- If you get angry, try not to shout. You can make your parents angry and they may think you do not respect them.
- If you have tried these things and you still cannot talk to your parents, find another older person you can talk to. It could be a teacher, the mother of a friend, an aunt, an older sister, grandmother, someone in your place of worship, or a health worker.

### How mothers can help their daughters

You may have grown up in a time when girls were not allowed to have an education, plan their families, or make decisions about their lives. **Life can be different for your daughter.** If you listen to her, share your own experiences, and give her useful information, you can help her make her own good decisions, and be true to herself as she grows from a girl into an adult.