You, your life, your dreams:
A BOOK FOR CARIBBEAN ADOLESCENTS

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FOREWORD

Everyday young people face situations where they must make choices that not only have implications for their individual futures, but for our common future. The choices they make are largely influenced by the values and skills they have been taught, or acquire over the years. To ensure a better quality of life for young people and a better world for all, it is essential to equip them with the tools to make right choices. These include providing access to education, health (including sexual and reproductive health), employment, and other opportunities that promote their social advancement and political inclusion.

This peer education manual, *You, Your Life, Your Dreams*, developed by Family Care International (FCI), which the CARICOM Secretariat and UNFPA Caribbean Office have partnered to adapt for use in the English-speaking Caribbean is an investment in the region’s young people. It provides information for young people to protect themselves against sexually transmitted infections including HIV, unplanned pregnancies, unsafe abortions, sexual abuse, violence, and exploitation.

It is an important educational resource for young people and those who work with youth, as it provides information about those issues that affect this fast growing segment of the population, using a simple and youth-friendly approach. The fact that the information contained in this manual has been validated by young people from the region gives us confidence that it reflects their realities.

At UNFPA, we stand by our commitment to invest in young people’s education and training, as well as their health (including sexual and reproductive health), as a means of ensuring their healthy transition to adulthood. This peer education manual complements other initiatives that we are involved with in the region that are designed to empower adolescents and youth to think critically, express themselves freely, and ultimately to achieve their dreams.

Harold Robinson
Representative, UNFPA
Office for the English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean
On behalf of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), I wish to commend the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) for producing a comprehensive manual for Caribbean youth, on issues which are central to their personal and socio-cultural development. The manual is reader-friendly, frank and open and bring to the table many issues that have been traditionally treated with secrecy, a situation which has often resulted in misinformation for our youth. Although the main focus of the manual is peer education among youth, it could also serve as an important resource for adults who seek to help youth to grapple with the myriad and often conflicting perspectives relating to their personal development.

It is recognized that given the nature of the issues addressed in the manual, countervailing perspectives must be brought to bear on the treatment of the material. Even as the Secretariat reviewed the material, it was conscious of the imperative for critical analysis and careful use of the materials by stakeholders within the context of legal frameworks of our societies and also their own cultural and religious environments.

It is our hope that the manual will prove to be useful to its intended target audience, not only in their efforts to understand themselves better and engage in healthy interpersonal relationships, but also in their quest for empowerment to make more informed decisions and participate in, and contribute to the social and economic development of the Caribbean Community.
Adolescence: The Big Change, The Big Challenge

Many people around the world define adolescence as the period of life between 10 and 19 years of age. If you are between 10 and 19 years old, you are an adolescent. Congratulations! You are a special person!

During adolescence you will be going through a lot of changes and trying out new things—from new looks and identities to new experiences, such as going out with friends, holding hands, kissing, going to parties, driving, and maybe even having a job. This is a very critical stage in your lifetime and it requires making serious choices, choices that will shape the rest of your life. You will start making decisions on your own, and some of these decisions may have unexpected outcomes. This is a period of learning, experiencing, and discovering the world outside your family circle. Most of what you learn you will learn from trial and error and you will have many opportunities to learn from your mistakes.

Your new looks, experiences, and identities may worry your parents, aunties and uncles because they don’t want you to get hurt or make mistakes. They may be nervous because they know that these years will have a big impact on the person you will become and the kind of life you will lead.
WHAT IS ADOLESCENCE?

Adolescence is the time when your growth and development speed up. Your body will change a lot in a short period of time, as will your way of thinking, your dreams, and your relationships with others. It is a time of confusing feelings and of changing moods—one moment you may be laughing your head off and the next you may be very sad, for no obvious reason. You will enjoy being with friends; you will be more autonomous and aware of both your rights and the rights of others.

Adolescence is a time when we physically and mentally develop into adults. During adolescence a lot of things start happening:

- Our bodies change—in ways that we like and some that we don’t.
- We have sexual feelings and may not always know what to do about them.
- We think more independently and want to make our own decisions.
- Our feelings about our family and our relationships with our parents may also change. Our parents may give us more responsibilities, which is a sign that they trust and rely on us. But they might also become stricter—keeping us from our friends and trying to make decisions for us about our schooling or our future.
- Our friends—and what they think—may matter to us much more than it used to.
- Our emotions may feel much more complicated to us than they did in the past. We may experience sudden changes in mood and sometimes we may not understand exactly what we are feeling or why.
- We may want to feel close to and loved by someone.
- We may face difficult decisions, and go through times when we don’t know to whom to turn for advice and guidance.

All in all, adolescence is a wonderful time that you will never forget. It is a special time for everyone, everywhere, from Belize to Tanzania. But it is mainly a very challenging time. It’s a time of big changes—physical, emotional, social—and big changes take time.

There’s a lot that we can do to make sure we have a happy and healthy adolescence. We can learn about our bodies and how our bodies will change and develop. We can try to understand ourselves and what we want out of life and from those around us, and think about and plan for our future. Planning is important because we don’t want things that affect us to happen, or not to happen, just by chance. Since we will be making choices, we’ll need to develop our ability to think independently and responsibly, and start paying more attention to the needs of others.

Adolescence can be complicated, especially when we face problems like:

- Pressure to have sex.
- Drugs and alcohol in schools and the community.
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV and AIDS.
- Being orphaned (for example, as a result of AIDS or an accident).
- Parents who are too busy or shy to talk with us about the changes we are going through.
- Parents who are overly strict or even violent.
Remember that we don’t have to go through these challenges alone. There are many people in our lives who can give us support when we are confused or sad and who can help answer our questions. These people include friends, partners, parents, other members of our families, teachers, and other trusted adults.

To cope with all these issues and experience a fulfilling adolescence, we need to be strong, creative, resourceful, and hopeful. Try to cope with the challenges you face with a positive attitude. You can also learn from the people around you who are strong and calm in the face of hard times.

**ADOLESCENCE IS A TIME OF DISCOVERY AND LEARNING**

During adolescence we become more conscious of ourselves as individuals, more independent, and we firm up our personalities. During adolescence, we experience and experiment with new feelings like attraction or shame. It is a time for dreams, hopes, planning, and falling in love. We start developing our own way of seeing reality which is based on our experiences, interests, opinions, and values. There are many factors that influence how we see reality, including social norms and expectations. But each of us will develop our own set of values and our own way of life.

**ADOLESCENCE IS ALSO A TIME WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE FACE RISKS**

All learning involves practicing and making mistakes. However, in wanting to try things out, sometimes we take risks that we cannot handle. This may be because we are not yet totally aware of our strengths and limitations, or of the challenges that new difficult situations bring. It may also be because we cannot anticipate problems and prepare ourselves for these challenges ahead of time.

Taking risks is not necessarily bad, but it is important that we take calculated risks that we can handle. To do this, we must have enough information to evaluate the risk, try to anticipate the consequences of our decisions, and trust in our own capacities to respond responsibly.

Young people engage in risky behaviours for many different reasons. They may feel that nothing bad will ever happen to them. They may be seeking admiration or approval from their peers. Or they may feel pressured to behave in a certain way. Often boys are told that men should be fearless, and may feel pressured to take risks they would prefer not to take. That can have serious consequences. One important sign of maturity is to be aware of our abilities and limits, and to take calculated risks.

For example, some young people may be pressured to join a gang or to get involved in a criminal activity like selling drugs. Some adolescents may drive a car at a high speed or under the influence of alcohol, endangering their life and the lives of the other passengers. They may behave this way due to peer pressure or to get approval from those around them.

Or maybe a couple may know about contraceptives, but think that as long as they don’t have sex frequently, they will be safe from an unwanted pregnancy even without using contraceptives. Or they may believe they know a lot about HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. They know that it can be transmitted through unprotected sex, but they don’t believe that either they or their partner could be infected. They may not consider that HIV could affect them or the people they know.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

- **Pregnancy can happen the first time you have unprotected sex.** In fact, every time a couple has unprotected sex, there is a 1 in 12 chance of pregnancy.

- **HIV infection does happen among adolescents.** The trend over the last few years indicates that adolescents and young adults are the most vulnerable group, whether in or out of school, with girls ages 15 to 19 years being very highly at risk of contracting HIV.
Many adolescents take risks because they think that bad things will not happen to them... …but pregnancy can happen even if you only have sex one time. It can happen the first time.

As you read this book carefully, you will find out how to avoid some of these risks, make good decisions, and experience a healthy and fulfilling adolescence. It is also helpful to share this book with your friends so they can also learn how to make smart and healthy choices. If you also share it with your parents or other adults around you, they may be better prepared to understand and talk with you.

The facts of life, values, and life skills are helpful as you go through adolescence.

THE FACTS

Facts are essential pieces of information—things you have to know to cope with everyday life and make good decisions. For information to be useful, it has to be clear, accurate, and timely.

Knowing the facts of life means knowing how to take good care of yourself physically and emotionally by eating well and taking good care of your body as well as of your emotions. Knowing the facts also means understanding how pregnancy happens, how HIV and AIDS and other STIs are spread, and how you can best avoid them. It means being aware of what drugs and alcohol can do to your body and brain, and knowing how best to cope with difficult situations and problems so that you can achieve your dreams.

Most importantly, knowing the facts is learning the difference between reality and myths or hearsay. It is very important to have the facts right when you’re looking at your options and making important decisions. Knowing the facts will also help you help and respect your peers.

This book will provide you with facts about:

- The changes going on in your body (Chapters 2, 3, and 4).
- Taking care of your physical and emotional health (Chapters 5 and 6).
- Relationships with other people—including parents, friends, boyfriends and girlfriends (Chapters 7 and 8).
- Sexuality, sex, and taking care of your sexual health (Chapters 9 and 10).
- Pregnancy and contraception (Chapter 11).
- Pressured and unwanted sex (Chapter 12).
- Drugs and alcohol (Chapter 13).
- Planning your future and reaching your dreams (Chapter 14).
VALUES

The word “value” has several meanings. One meaning refers to how much something is worth—what it costs in dollars or any other currency to buy that particular object.

But the word “value” can also refer to the things we believe in and the things we think are important in life. We inherit our values from our family, culture, and environment and we adopt new ones as we grow up and mature. Some examples of universal values are:

- Honesty and solidarity.
- Kindness and compassion.
- Cooperation and perseverance.
- Forgiveness and respect.
- Acceptance of differences.
- Justice and equality.
- Freedom and respect of rights.

These are just a few values but you may hold many more, such as working hard in school, helping your parents at home, being loyal to your friends, and being active in your community or church, mosque, or temple.

Values shape your decisions and guide your actions. For example, someone who values kindness and acceptance will stand up for a disabled classmate or neighbour that other people are treating unkindly. Someone who values honesty will choose to return the money if a shopkeeper gave her or him too much change.

What are your values? What is important to you? What do you believe in? As you read this book, think about your own values. Being aware of your own values will help you make the right choices. Even when you face pressure from others, you will be able to make decisions that feel right for you and that you are comfortable with.

Standing up for yourself is a life skill.
LIFE SKILLS

Life skills are abilities that will help us act on our values and principles. We need life skills to stay happy and healthy during adolescence in order to:

• **Talk about our feelings.** Our feelings are important, but other people may not understand how we feel unless we tell them. Learn how to let others know what you think and want by being direct and by using statements that start with “I”: “I wish,” “I would like,” “I need,” “I don’t like...” Practice using “I” statements until you feel comfortable saying them.

• **Communicate what we feel.** We usually have good reasons for feeling the way we do and it's important to learn how to get those reasons across to others without putting people down or making them feel bad by being unkind, aggressive, or overly critical.

• **Know what we think and stand by, no matter what other people say.** Everyone has beliefs about what is right and wrong. These beliefs are called principles. Sometimes we may know exactly what our principles are, while other times things aren’t as clear and we may have to carefully think through what is right for us and why. It is alright to feel unsure and if we do, we can talk it out with someone we trust. When we are clear about what we think is right and why, we'll be able to stand up for what we believe in.

• **Learn to make good decisions under pressure.** Making good decisions means carefully weighing all our choices and thinking about their consequences. It can be hard to do this if someone is rushing us or putting pressure on us to decide quickly. One important part of making good decisions is being clear about our principles and our overall goals in life. Another important part of decision making is giving ourselves the time we need. Remember, we can always tell someone: “I need to think about this. Let me get back to you.”

Assertiveness, creative thinking, problem solving, decision making, coping, and self-awareness are examples of life skills.

Life skills are just as important as knowing the facts of life. For example, you may know that unprotected sex can lead to pregnancy and STIs, including HIV and AIDS. With this in mind you may decide that you want to abstain from having sex for the time being, and you use assertiveness with your boyfriend or girlfriend to communicate your point.

As adolescents, we have the right to recreation and education, to a dignifying job, and to live without violence. Our laws protect young people from discrimination based on age, sex, socioeconomic status, racial or ethnic origin, religion or beliefs. All adolescents should be able to make decisions about their sexuality, and decide without pressure whether or not to have sex, and when and whether or not to have children. To do this, young people need access to information, counselling, and health care services.
We need life skills to stand up for our rights and beliefs, especially when people we care about, and whose respect we want, think differently.

How are your life skills? Can you stand up for what you believe is right even if your friends think otherwise? Can you stand up for the rights of those around you? Are you strong enough to stand up for your health or even for your life? Start practicing as you read this book!

Although adolescence may be considered a complicated stage of life, it doesn’t have to be a time of problems. All these new opportunities and experimenting can be challenging but if we learn the facts and build our values and life skills, adolescence can be a very creative and fulfilling period of our lives.

Reading this manual will help you make good choices and keep yourself safe and healthy. If you share it with friends, or even teachers, parents or other adults, you can help start an open dialogue and debate on these and other personal topics that are so important to you.

Making good decisions under pressure and standing up for what you believe in are life skills.
Our Changing Body and Mind

Our body starts to change the moment we’re born, and continues changing throughout our lives. During adolescence body changes became faster and more obvious. Puberty is the first stage of adolescence, when these big changes in your body—but also in your mind, your emotions, and your relationships with others—start taking place. Most girls and boys enter puberty between the ages of 10 and 16 years of age. We each have a biological clock that determines when this stage will start. It differs from person to person and between girls and boys. Girls start puberty around two years earlier than boys. You shouldn’t worry if your puberty is delayed or if it happens at an earlier age.

THE GROWTH SPURT: THE START OF PUBERTY

Up to the age of 9 or 10, boys and girls have different sexual organs but they both have flat chests and similarly sized muscles. Physical differences between girls and boys start becoming obvious during puberty. The first sign of puberty in girls is the breast button. In boys puberty starts with a sudden growth of the testicles (over 3 mm).

On average, girls start experiencing physical changes around the ages of 10 or 11, when they suddenly start growing faster. This period of fast growth is called a growth spurt. For girls, the growth spurt usually lasts about three years. During these years girls are often taller and bigger than boys of the same age.

Boys start their growth spurt a little later (up to two years later) than girls do—on average around the age of 12 or 13. For boys, the growth spurt usually lasts longer than it does for girls. In fact, some boys keep growing until they reach age 19 or 20.

Remember, these are only average ages. Some adolescents start their growth spurt earlier and others start later. Starting your growth spurt early or late doesn’t have much effect on how tall you will be or how fast you will grow.

During their growth spurt, boys and girls often feel awkward and clumsy because different parts of the body grow at different times and rates. The first parts of the body to grow are usually the hands and feet, followed by the arms, legs, hips, and chest. Young people who suddenly grow very fast often find themselves tripping and falling. It can feel strange to suddenly be several centimetres taller!

Some boys and girls grow so rapidly in puberty that their skin can’t keep up with their fast-growing bones and they sometimes develop “stretch marks”. Stretch marks are light or darkish lines on skin which may fade or get less noticeable as a person gets older, though they usually do not disappear completely.
Puberty is actually a gradual process even though it seems like you are growing very fast. It will take some time before you have become fully grown physically and emotionally. In the meantime, here are some things to keep in mind:

EVERYBODY IS DIFFERENT, EVERYBODY IS SPECIAL

Each person enters puberty at a different time and speed. If you are a girl, your breasts may be slower to develop than those of your friend, but you may start to menstruate earlier. Or you may experience everything much later on. If you are a boy, you might have a friend whose voice was deep by the time he was 13. He might have pubic hair and muscles already, whereas you have yet to start your growth spurt.

Remember that everyone is different and whenever these changes happen to you is the right time for you, since it is genetically determined.

In terms of health, it does not really matter if you are developing faster or more slowly than your peers. Your body will change when it is ready and nothing you do will make you develop faster or more slowly, so be patient. However if you are worried about your growth rate, you may want to consult with a health worker. In any case, even if you’re not concerned, you may find it helpful to meet with a health worker to check on your growth and development—a good opportunity to ask the many questions that most adolescents have about their bodies and their feelings.

Sometimes it can be hard to be different from others, for instance, if you are the first girl in your group to develop breasts or the last guy to have your voice change. Being different may affect your self-esteem and you may even isolate yourself from your friends. If you are a boy, what may worry you most is to have a delay in your development. If you are a girl, you may be more worried about your faster development.
Try to remember that none of these things will matter in the long run. By the time you are twenty, it will not make any difference whether your voice started to change when you were 13 or 16. It will not matter if your periods started when you were 11 or 14.

Although you may not be able to change your body, there are things about yourself that you can do:

- You can try to be the best person you can be—work hard in school and on anything else you wish to accomplish. You can try to improve your personality, sense of humour and character. Focus on who you are and who you want to be—not what you look like.

- Try your best to ignore teasing and don’t let other people’s teasing words get to you. After a while they will get tired of teasing you. Also, remember not to tease others.

- Don’t give in to pressure in seeking the approval of your peers. Don’t let your need to fit in with people push you into doing things that you know are not right for you—like abusing drugs or alcohol or taking risks that may hurt you or your future.

- Inform yourself. Make sure you know where to get the correct information you need and the answers to your questions as you go through adolescence.

We should keep in mind that people of our age often know more myths (false information) than they do facts—especially when it comes to explaining puberty and sex. Our friends may tell us things that are not true, so we need to know where to get the right facts. Myths can be dangerous because they can add to our worries and confusion. At times believing myths can lead us to want to change things that are beyond our control (like our skin colour or the size of our breasts or genitals) or even to do things that could harm us.

HORMONES

What controls the changes in our bodies? What makes us develop faster or slower?

The answer is hormones, which are natural chemical substances in our bodies. Hormones act like messengers that tell our body how and when to grow and develop. Growth spurts are caused by a growth hormone, which is released by the brain in increasing amounts during puberty.
In addition to the growth hormone, sex hormones are also released during puberty. Female sex hormones, called oestrogen and progesterone, are produced in the ovaries. In boys, the sexual hormone is called testosterone and is produced in the testicles. These sex hormones cause the differences between the shape of men’s and women’s bodies. When girls enter puberty their hips begin to develop, often at a faster pace than their shoulders. Girls’ hips can become wider and rounder, making their waists seem smaller and narrower in comparison. Their breasts also grow and develop.

Adolescence can be a time of very strong emotions.

In boys, sex hormones cause their shoulders to broaden and their arms and legs to become thicker and more muscular. Boys’ chests do not change as dramatically as girls’ breasts do at puberty, but they do change. Some boys experience some swelling of their chests during puberty, though it goes away in time.

Hormones influence our emotions too. We often feel intense emotions: one minute we may feel happy and excited and the next minute we may feel like we want to cry.

These changes in our emotions are called “mood swings” and most young people experience them from time to time. The production of hormones which suddenly increases in puberty causes young people to experience many strong emotions in a short time. As we get older and the production of hormones drops, we will feel more in control of our emotions.

OUR EXTERNAL GENITALS

In addition to causing changes in girls’ and boys’ body shapes and emotions, hormones also make our genitals develop and grow. Genitals or genitalia are the collective terms for the reproductive and sex organs in both men and women. In boys these include the epididium, vas deferens, seminal vesicles, prostrate gland, urethra, penis, scrotum, and testes (see Chapter 3); in girls they include the ovaries, Fallopian tubes, uterus, vagina, vulva, and clitoris (see Chapter 4). Before adolescence, our genitals were mostly the place from where we relieved ourselves. During adolescence they become larger and have a role in our sexual and reproductive lives.

In girls, the skin and tissue in the vulva becomes softer and thicker. In boys, the penis starts to lengthen and thicken; the testicles also grow and start to produce sperm. Sperm are the male reproductive cells.

Reproductive organs start producing new fluids during puberty. Girls and women start producing ovules (female reproductive cells), menstrual blood, and vaginal fluids. Menarche (the first menstruation) starts around two years after the appearance of the breast button. Boys and men produce semen, a mucus-like fluid in which sperm swim. Semen comes out of the penis when a boy ejaculates (read Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 for more on boys and girls).
BODY HAIR AND SKIN CHANGES

Our skin and body hair change during puberty as well. The skin of many adolescents becomes oilier. This can lead to pimples, which is a common condition in adolescents (read Chapter 5 for information on good skin care).

Another sign of puberty is the growth of body hair in new places. Both boys and girls may notice the growth of a little more hair on their legs and arms. In addition, boys grow hair around the base of their penis, on their face, chest, and in their armpits; girls tend to have new body hair growth around their external genitals and in their armpits too.

Body hair that grows around the genitals is called pubic hair. Pubic hair helps keep the genital area clean, which is very important because the skin there is delicate and easily irritated. Pubic hair also helps to hold sweat and other secretions away from the sensitive skin of the genitals.

It is normal for young people to have a variety of reactions to the appearance of pubic hair.

Keep in mind that pubic hair is natural and has a job to do. Whether you have a little or a lot of pubic hair on your genitals, try not to worry too much about it.

We also experience growth of body hair in our armpits during puberty. Like pubic hair, underarm hair has a job to do—armpit hair keeps sweat away from our skin.

Facial hair is usually the last new body hair to appear for boys and young men. Hair starts growing on the corners of a boy’s upper lips. Sideburns often grow at the same time. Lastly, facial hair appears on the upper part of the cheek, just below the middle of the lower lip, and finally on the chin. Like with other features, the genes you inherit will determine when you start to grow facial hair and how much of it you will grow.

OUR MINDS

While there are many obvious changes to the body during puberty, our minds are also changing in less visible ways.

During adolescence, our mental abilities increase a great deal, along with our capacity for critical and independent thinking. We start developing our own individual identity as a result of these changes. We will want to think more independently and make our own decisions. Often we may feel like questioning our parents’ beliefs and reasons for doing things, and this is very healthy! We may want to try new things for ourselves, and, at times, to take risks.

All these mental changes are exciting and critical signs that mean we are developing fast and maturing. But, even though our mental abilities are increasing and we are learning from new experiences every day, there is still a lot we don’t know. In fact, nobody knows everything, so it is important to know where or who to go to for the information or advice you may need. Ask questions and learn all you can!
### Summary of Chapter 2

#### Our Changing Body and Mind

Puberty, which usually begins between the ages of 10 and 16, is the gradual process during which you transition from a child to an adult. Each person starts to change at a different time, and some people develop more quickly or more slowly than others. Everyone is different and there is nothing you can do to control the timing of these changes.

What should you expect to happen during puberty?

- A growth spurt: your hands, feet, arms, legs, hips and chest will become larger. Your body produces hormones, which are a natural chemical substance in your body. Hormones act like messengers and tell your body how and when to grow and develop.

- Your external and internal genitals will develop, mature, and begin producing fluids.

- If you are a girl, you will start to menstruate.

- Your skin may become oilier.

- You will begin to have pubic hair and a little more hair in your armpits, on your legs and arms, and, if you are a boy, on your face.

- You may experience a wide range of strong emotions, including mood swings.

- Your mind will mature and your mental capacities will increase.

Regardless of how rapidly or slowly you change—or when you start to change—try to remember that these changes are perfectly normal. Getting used to your new body can take some time, so try to be patient as you adjust to your changing body.
In Chapter 2, you read about some of the changes that boys experience during puberty. This chapter will give you more information about these changes. Although this information is about boys, it is also important for girls to know what boys go through during adolescence.

**BODY SHAPE AND SIZE**

Most boys enter puberty at the age of 11 or 12, and have their growth spurt between the ages of 13 and 16 years. Of course some boys start a bit earlier, and some boys start later. Your body will start getting much taller and bigger during the growth spurt.

One of the first parts of our body to grow may be our feet. In fact, the bones in our feet often grow much faster than the other parts of the body, so our feet may reach full size long before the rest of our body. If you feel as though you are suddenly clumsy, it may be because your feet are much larger than they were a short while ago. Be patient, it may take time for the rest of your body time to catch up!

Some bones in your body will grow more than others, causing your body shape to change. For example, your shoulders may grow a lot, whereas your hips may only grow a little. Your hips may seem very narrow in comparison to your broad shoulders. Your legs and arms will probably grow more than your backbone, so your legs may seem long compared to your chest or the trunk of your body. As a result, your shape will be very different from that of a little boy.

Your muscles also get bigger, especially in your legs and arms, and you will get stronger as these muscles develop. Your chest will also get bigger as muscles and some fat accumulate. Many boys also notice that their nipples and chest change during puberty. The nipples may get a little bit bigger and the area around the nipples may get larger and darker in colour.

Some boys find that their chests swell and become painful. A few boys have a lot of swelling, which might worry them into thinking they will develop breasts like those of a woman. Don’t worry because this is perfectly normal. The swelling and tenderness are caused by all the hormones in your body and will eventually disappear once your body stops producing so many hormones.

Try to be patient through all these normal changes. You may grow faster or slower than your friends, but your body will develop during puberty and adolescence. When and how much you grow is determined mostly by the characteristics you inherit from your parents. Even if you start growing very late, you might still end up taller than many boys who began their growth spurt earlier.

**YOUR VOICE**

Your voice will be another sign that you are going through puberty, as it will change usually some time after you begin your growth spurt.

Boys will notice that their voices become lower and deeper during puberty, which takes place because of the effects of a hormone called testosterone. This hormone causes the voice box (larynx) to grow larger. As your vocal cords get thicker and longer, your voice gets lower and deeper.
Eric, 15, St. Lucia

“The first thing I noticed was the breaking of my voice, brood chest and shoulders. I was happy about it because I saw that now I am an adolescent.”

Junior, 14, Trinidad and Tobago

“I experienced the change in my voice just after I had experienced wet dreams.”

One of the first signs that your voice is changing is often a sudden squeak or cracking of the voice when talking. It can happen very unpredictably: your voice will be normal one minute, but the next minute it may be high and squeaky. Some boys find it embarrassing when their voice cracks and others do not notice it very much. Either way is normal and a healthy sign of development.

Voice changes can happen at embarrassing moments.

YOUR GENITALS

The penis has a “body” or shaft which is the tube-like part of the penis and a “head” or glans which is the tip of the penis and its most sensitive and delicate part. The penis is made of muscles that surround a narrow tube, called the urethra. Urine and semen pass through the urethra (refer to illustration “male reproductive anatomy”).

The head of the penis is covered by a small, thin fold of skin, called the foreskin. Sometimes this skin is removed in an operation called circumcision (see next page for more on circumcision).

The size of the penis varies from man to man and it has no relation to body size. Sometimes adolescent boys (and even grown men) worry about their penis. Is it too small or too big? Why does it curve like that? Is there something wrong with it?

Although sometimes the size of the penis is associated with masculinity or sexual performance, this is a myth. Sexual performance and pleasure do not depend on penis size. The size of the penis actually has little effect on the enjoyment of sexual activity. In fact, sexual enjoyment is mostly determined by how you feel and your state of mind. It’s the relationship that counts—not the size or shape of the penis.
Hanging below the penis is the **scrotum**. The scrotum is like a bag or sac of skin that holds the **testes** or **testicles** where sperm are made. The skin of the scrotum can be a bit hairy and oily and can collect dirt. If it is not washed regularly, it can become odorous.

During childhood the scrotum is drawn up close to the body. But, as we go through puberty, the scrotum begins to loosen and hang down. This happens because the testicles need to be kept at a temperature lower than that of our body to make sperm. When we are cold or frightened or feeling sexually aroused, our scrotum may get tighter and draw up close to our body again.

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**Do you know about circumcision?**

The foreskin covers the glands of the penis and it can be pulled down the shaft. **Circumcision** is a procedure where this fold of skin around the top of the penis is cut.

Circumcision is a medical—and sometimes a religious or cultural—practice that some men and boys have undergone, and others have not. There is nothing wrong with being circumcised, and there is nothing wrong with not being circumcised. Does circumcision affect sexual pleasure? This is a difficult question since each person experiences sex in his or her own way. What is true is that both circumcised and uncircumcised males can enjoy sex and please their partners.

While circumcision can be a religious and cultural practice, in some cases it is performed for health reasons—mainly because circumcision makes it easier to keep the penis clean. But there are other health reasons for circumcision too. Sometimes the foreskin can be too tight or attached to the head of the penis and cannot fully roll down the shaft. This can cause swelling and pain and often circumcision is a good solution.

Research has found that circumcision helps protect against HIV and AIDS because the foreskin may be particularly sensitive to HIV infection, **but even if you have been circumcised, you are at risk of HIV and AIDS and STIs and should always practise safer sex**.

What does all this mean for you? If you are not circumcised, should you get circumcised so that it’s easier to keep your penis clean? The answer is No. Just practise good hygiene and remember to clean under your foreskin carefully. That’s all you need to do. However, boys and young men who cannot roll back their foreskin and feel pain when they get an erection should talk to a health worker.
DO YOU KNOW there are myths about the penis?

There is a lot of false information about the penis:

1. *If you do not exercise the penis through sex it will stop functioning and decrease in size.* This is false! Sex is not “exercise” for the penis. Abstaining from sex altogether or waiting to have sex does not hurt your penis.

2. *A penis increases in size the more you have sex.* False again! Your penis size is determined by the traits you inherit from your parents—not anything you do with it.

3. *A small penis cannot please a sexual partner.* False! The size of the penis has little effect on the enjoyment of sexual intercourse.

4. *Boys with penises that are too big or too small cannot use condoms.* Not true! Condoms are made to fit tightly and everyone can use them.

5. *You need to have sex whenever you get an erection.* False! This is definitely not true. Erections go down on their own and it is not necessary to have sex when you have one. You may experience painful swelling in the testicles (also known as “blue balls”) but this will not prevent you from having another erection.

6. *Boys with big thumbs have big penises.* False! Many people say things like this (or they say it about boys with big noses, big feet, ears, etc.), but it is not true. There is no relation between penis size and any other body part. There is no way you can know anything about a boy’s penis just by looking at him.

7. *Accumulated sperm causes backache, madness, headache, impotence, and acne.* False! Even though your testicles produce millions of sperm, it is impossible for sperm to build up and cause problems. No harm will occur to you if you delay sexual relationships.

8. *Wet dreams are a sign that you need to have sex.* False! A wet dream is just one way that your body releases sperm and semen and is not a sign that you need to have sex. Your body can regulate itself perfectly without your having to take any risks.

PRACTISING GOOD HYGIENE

Whether we are circumcised or not, it is important to wash and clean our penis every day—just as we wash every other part of our body. We should also wash the scrotum, between the scrotum and thighs and in between the buttocks.

If you are not circumcised, roll back the foreskin and wash gently beneath it.
If you are not circumcised, you need to roll back the foreskin and gently clean this area. You may notice that there are tiny bumps at the base of the glans. These bumps are glands that produce a whitish creamy substance called **smegma** (sometimes called “cheese” or “custard”). Smegma helps the foreskin slide back smoothly over the glans. However, if smegma accumulates beneath the foreskin, it can become odorous or cause an infection. It is very important to keep the area under the foreskin clean at all times.

**ERECPTIONS**

Normally the penis is soft and hangs down, but during an erection more blood flows into the penis than usual and less blood flows out. This makes the penis become larger, harder, and stand out from the body.

When your penis is erect, you will find that you cannot urinate easily because a muscle closes the bladder off. You will have to wait until the erection goes down before you can relieve yourself. An erection can happen when a penis is touched or caressed, when you are excited by a sexual thought, or by the sight of someone you find attractive. Erections can also be caused by anxiety and stress. It is also very common for boys to wake up with an erection in the morning. Your penis will probably become erect and then go down about 5 to 7 times while you sleep, which is also completely normal.

Erections may occur in men of all ages, including babies and old men. Sometimes boys worry that they have too many erections, but this is a normal and healthy part of growing up. Though it can be embarrassing to get an erection in class or in a public place, most of the time you are probably the only person who is aware of it.

**EJACULATION**

When you reach puberty you may start noticing a different fluid coming out of the penis—one that is milky in colour and sticky. It is thick, not watery like urine.

This fluid comes out of the penis when a man ejaculates or “comes”. Ejaculation is the climax of sexual excitement; though keep in mind that we don't necessarily ejaculate every time we have an erection.

The mucus-like fluid is made up of two things. About 10% of the fluid is made up of millions of *sperm*, which are the male reproductive cells. Sperm are so small that you cannot see them unless you have a microscope. If you could see them, you would see that each sperm has a round body or head, and a long thin tail. The other 90% of the fluid is a milky liquid called *semen* or seminal fluid. Semen allows the sperm to swim, provides nourishment for them, and keeps them alive.
Sperm are produced in the **testicles** (see illustration, page 17). Semen—the white milky fluid—is made in the **seminal vesicles**, which are two glands behind the bladder. When a man ejaculates, sperm mix with semen from the seminal vesicles, passing through tubes called the **vas deferens**, into the **urethra**, and out of the opening at the tip of the penis.

It may seem that a lot of this sticky fluid comes out of the penis during ejaculation, but it is only about a teaspoonful. Each teaspoonful contains about 500 million sperm! Each one of those sperm could cause a pregnancy.

If the boy or man is infected with HIV, one teaspoon of semen will probably also contain millions of the virus that causes AIDS.

Some people worry that a latex condom will not be able to hold all 500 million sperm. But those sperm are very, very small, and provided a condom is put on correctly and used consistently, it will be able to hold them all (see Chapter 10 for more on condoms). Also, sperm cannot cross the latex wall and condoms are carefully tested.

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Some boys worry that each time they ejaculate they reduce the amount of semen in their body and that they will run out of semen and won’t have enough when they need it. This can never happen because the male body continues to make sperm throughout a man’s life. Also keep in mind that there is no way that too much sperm and semen can accumulate and build pressure in your body, as it has ways to release excess sperm and semen. One of these ways is wet dreams.

**WET DREAMS**

Boys sometimes release semen or “ejaculate” while they are asleep. This is called a wet dream or nocturnal emission. It is the body’s way of getting rid of excess semen and is perfectly normal. The first wet dream is often also the first time semen is released from the body. Boys and young men will probably wake up and find a damp patch in the bed or on their clothes when experiencing a wet dream.

Wet dreams can be confusing or worrisome if you do not know about them or if they catch you by surprise. You might think that you have wet your bed or that you are sick, but ejaculate fluid is milky white and nothing at all like blood or urine.

Wet dreams only happen when we are asleep. Many boys who wake up to find that they have ejaculated recall that they were dreaming about something sexually arousing, but we can have a wet dream even if we have not been having a sexy or erotic dream.
Wet dreams are nothing to be embarrassed about. They are the natural and normal way our bodies make room for new sperm.

For some boys, starting to have wet dreams is a big experience—something they feel happy about.

Other boys aren’t quite so happy when they first start having wet dreams, and this is perfectly normal too.

You shouldn’t be worried about wet dreams since they are perfectly normal. The more you inform yourself about your body, the more comfortable you will be with all the changes you’re going through. Also, being well informed will enable you to help younger boys understand what is happening to them as they go through adolescence.
Summary of Chapter 3

Boys

A boy can expect many changes to occur in his body during puberty. These changes are gradual and occur at different ages for different boys. Here are some of the changes we can expect:

- Our body will grow, especially the bones in our shoulders, arms, legs, and feet.
- Our muscles will also develop and we will grow stronger.
- Our voice will change and then deepen as our vocal chords get thicker and longer.
- Our penis will grow, and our scrotum will begin to hang down.
- We will have erections more frequently.
- We may have wet dreams (we may ejaculate in our sleep) at night.

As we go through these changes, there are a few things to keep in mind:

- Penises come in a variety of shapes and sizes, all of which are normal.
- There is nothing wrong with being circumcised or not being circumcised.
- We should wash and clean our penis every day, always rolling back and washing under the foreskin if we are not circumcised.
- We do not need to have sex when we have an erection.
- Wet dreams are normal, common and nothing to worry about.

Whenever these changes occur is the right time. We are each unique and completely normal!
Girls

Chapter 2 addressed some of the changes that girls and young women experience during puberty. This chapter will provide even more information. Although this information is about girls, it is also important for boys to learn what girls go through during adolescence.

BODY SHAPE AND SIZE

Most girls start growing quickly around the time they are 10 or 11 years old—but there are girls who may start growing when they are younger or older than this. Different parts of our body grow at different rates. Our feet are often the first part of the body to grow. We might even feel like our feet are too big for our body, but our body will soon catch up with our feet.

Other bones will also start growing, at their own speed. Our arms and legs may start growing quickly while our backbone grows more slowly.

Another change we may notice is that our hips start developing. The hipbones become larger, as soft, fatty tissue collects on our hips, thighs and buttocks. Around this time breasts start developing and girls notice their bodies taking a curvier shape.

YOUR BREASTS

The development of the breast button—which usually happens when a girl is between 9 and 11 years old—is the first sign of puberty in girls. Some girls begin to develop breasts when they are 8 or 9, but other girls do not start until much later. The development of breasts is caused by a hormone called oestrogen which makes breast tissues grow.

There are an endless variety of breast shapes and sizes, all of which are unique and normal. The size and shape of our breasts are determined by the traits we inherit from our parents and by the amount of fatty tissue deposited in them.

The nipples will probably get larger and stand out more than they used to and the skin surrounding the nipple—the areola—gets darker and larger. We also may see tiny bumps in the areola, which is normal. These bumps are little glands that produce a substance that helps protect the nipple when a woman has a baby, if the baby breastfeeds.

As the nipples and areola get larger and darker, breasts grow larger and fuller. Our breasts might feel sore, making it painful if they are bumped or hit. This is normal and is no cause for alarm. Breasts are very sensitive, especially the nipples. When stimulated by different sensations, such as touch or even cold weather, nipples can become hard and erect.
Some girls’ breasts grow slowly, while for others development is quick. On average it takes about four years for breasts to fully develop, but the process can be slower or faster depending on the girl. Whether your breasts are large or small they are the right size for you.

Also, breasts grow unevenly and one breast may become a bit bigger than the other breast. In fact, no one has two breasts that are exactly the same size, but usually this difference is not really noticeable. The shape of nipples also varies. Some women’s nipples turn inward and instead of pointing out, they sink into the areola.
Breasts have different meanings in different contexts. In some cultures, it is fine for women to go bare breasted. In other cultures, doing this would be considered very shocking and indecent. In most places, the development of breasts is usually an important event in the life of a girl or young woman—it is a sign of growing up.

Some girls feel embarrassed when their breasts begin to grow, which is normal too. They may be embarrassed about their breasts because none of their friends have begun to develop breasts. Though some girls may feel happy about their breast development and others could feel embarrassed at first, we can all learn to like our bodies.

It would be great if people did not tease others about their breasts, but teasing can happen and can be cruel. Try your best to ignore people who tease and concentrate on what you like about yourself without paying too much attention to what other people may say. Also remember that you should not tease others.
DID YOU KNOW that there are myths about breasts?

People say a lot of things about breasts that are not true:

1. *The sexiest girls have pointed breasts.* This is false! Sexiness is a feeling, and different people find different things sexy.

2. *Rubbing onions or scallions on nipples or letting insects bite them makes breasts grow faster.* Not true! Hormones are what make the breasts develop — nothing else will make them grow faster or slower.

3. *Girls with dark skin around their nipples have already had sex.* False! Like the colour of your skin, the colour of the ring around the nipples (the areola) is determined by the genetic traits you inherit from your parents.

4. *Breasts grow big when girls let boys touch them.* Not true! The size of breasts is genetically determined. Nothing you do will make them bigger or smaller.

5. *Girls with breasts that droop have already had sex, an abortion, or a baby.* False again! Breasts droop because of gravity. If you have larger breasts they are more likely to droop because of their weight.

6. *Wearing a bra makes breasts droop.* False! Bras actually support breasts. They prevent the skin and breast tissue from stretching and losing their elasticity.

7. *Girls with big breasts will have more milk for their babies.* False! Milk production does not depend on the size of the breasts. Even small breasts produce enough milk to feed and satisfy a baby.

TAKING CARE OF YOUR BREASTS

Breasts are very sensitive and there are a few things you should know about taking care of them. You should never pluck body hair that may grow around nipples, as doing so can cause an infection. It is normal to have some body hair there.

Some girls and women may have a little discharge coming from their nipples, which is also normal. However, if the discharge seems to have blood in it or is brownish in colour, see a health worker.

Breasts are very sensitive to touch for many women. Touching and caressing your breasts is very pleasurable and can be sexually exciting. It is important that you learn how and when to obtain pleasure fondling your breasts. Since this is part of the sexual foreplay and exciting for your partner as well, it is also important to establish your boundaries and discuss them with your partner beforehand. Nobody should ever touch your breasts without your consent.

BRAS

A bra provides support so your breasts don’t move or bounce when you walk, run, dance, or play.

There are different types of bras and it is best to purchase one with good fit and support. Many women figure out their bra size simply by trying on different sizes to see which one is most comfortable. This works just fine. You can also take measurements to figure out the right bra size. To take your measurements, wrap measuring tape around your torso just underneath your breast and around the fullest part of your breast. Knowing these two measurements can be helpful when purchasing a bra.
YOUR EXTERNAL GENITALS

The external genitalia in a female body are collectively called the **vulva**. Women's vulva includes the lips, the clitoris, and three openings in the genital area. From front to back these are the urethra, the vagina, and the anus (see illustration of the female genitalia). The opening of the vagina is the biggest of the three and connects to the internal reproductive organs through a short tube about 7 cm deep and 3-4 cm wide, made up of soft folds of skin, which is the vagina.

The vagina in an adult woman is very strong, extremely stretchy, and very muscular. During childbirth, it has to stretch to many times its usual size to allow a baby to leave the mother's body. But the vagina of a young girl is thin and cannot stretch very much, causing it to tear or burst during childbirth (for more information see Chapter 11). This causes serious problems, which is one of the reasons why childbirth can be dangerous for girls.

The walls of the vagina begin to produce a fluid or discharge during puberty. This fluid is thicker and stickier than saliva, and its purpose is to keep the vagina clean and maintain an environment where good bacteria and fungi can grow and prevent infections. It is common and healthy to have more vaginal discharge at certain times of the menstrual cycle and during sexual arousal.

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**DO YOU KNOW the facts about the vagina?**

There are many myths about the vagina. Here are some:

1. *The vagina is the dirtiest part of your body.* **False!** The mouth is the dirtiest part of your body. Vaginal fluids and menstrual blood are actually clean, but once they leave the body, bacteria can breed in them and may make them odorous.

2. *The vagina is not closed at the end. It is just a big hole.* **False!** The vagina is closed at the end by the cervix. Condoms or tampons will not travel up into the body.

3. *It is obscene to touch the vagina.* **Not true!** Your vagina is a part of your body, and as such, you are free to touch it in private. Unless you feel comfortable and have given consent, no one except you should touch your vagina.

4. *The vagina is only for the pleasure of men.* **False!** The vagina is part of a woman’s body, and it functions as a reproductive organ as well as a source of pleasure for her and for her partner. But it is hers and hers alone!
The vagina is also extremely sensitive to touch and is the centre of orgasms in women, no matter how the orgasm is primarily brought about (see Chapter 9). Stimulation of any sexually sensitive zone can provoke a vaginal orgasm in women.

The opening of the vagina is surrounded and protected by the labia majora and the labia minora, which are the outer and inner vaginal lips made up of folds of skin. There are many small glands in the labia, and you may perspire and have some white secretions there.

The clitoris is where the inner lips (the labia minora) join at the front. The clitoris looks like a small bump of flesh. It is filled with nerve endings, making it extremely sensitive to touch. When stimulated it enlarges — similar to what happens to the penis — and results in great pleasure and sexual arousal, sometimes ending in orgasm. In fact, stimulation of the clitoris is essential for some women to bring about orgasm.

Deep inside you, at the end of the vagina, is the cervix. The cervix closes the end of the vagina, with only a small opening leading to the uterus (womb). The opening is really narrow and meant to allow the passage of menstrual blood going out and sperm swimming in. Some people fear that during sexual intercourse a condom could slide off the penis and travel up into the uterus. This is impossible because the opening of the cervix is much too small. The cervix only stretches during childbirth so that the baby can come down from the uterus, into the vagina, and out of the body.

The surface of the cervix is very delicate, especially in young girls and young women. The cervix can be damaged or infected by bacteria, fungi, and viruses that may enter the body during sexual intercourse. This could lead to cancer of the cervix. Girls who have sex while they are very young, who have many sexual partners, or who have HIV are more at risk for cancer of the cervix than girls who have not been involved in these practices and are HIV negative. You can protect your cervix by delaying sex, or if you are sexually active, by using latex condoms and practicing safer sex (read Chapter 10 for more on sexual health).

PRACTISING GOOD HYGIENE

The vulva and anus should be washed regularly and kept dry. It’s a good idea to avoid sharing towels with friends or family members as towels can pass infections from one person to another. Try to wear clean cotton panties. In very hot weather, nylon panties should be avoided as they hold in moisture and heat, which causes the growth of bacteria and fungi. If you cannot find cotton panties, wear ones with a cotton lining.

After you pass urine or defecate, you should wipe from the front of your genitals backwards towards the anus. Make sure to avoid wiping forward, as you risk pulling germs from the anus to the vagina and urethra. This can cause an infection.

You should never wash inside the vagina unless a health worker instructs you to do so. Some girls and women try to wash inside the vagina with harsh soaps, or spray the area with deodorants or perfumes. None of this is necessary and it can even be harmful because harsh soaps, perfumes, and vaginal deodorants can change normal vaginal fluids and irritate the skin inside the vagina.

Sometimes women introduce herbs, pieces of cloth, and other objects into the vagina to “clean” or “tighten” it. This is not a healthy practice because the skin inside the vagina is very delicate. Introducing foreign objects can cause small cuts, and sores in the wall of the vagina, which could become infected and also increase the potential risk of HIV infection.

You should never introduce any object inside your vagina, except for tampons or medicines indicated by a health worker. In this case, be sure to follow the instructions carefully. For more details on tampons, see section “What to Use” on page 35.
It is necessary to pay close attention to your normal vaginal discharge and how it changes during your monthly cycle so that you can recognise any unusual changes. If you pay attention closely, you will notice that the discharge is not always the same. Sometimes it may be clear, while at other times it may be a bit whitish like egg white. When you are ovulating it may be more slippery and clear. Female vaginal fluids also change with sexual arousal.

If the discharge becomes heavier or thicker, changes colour to yellow, green, or brown, or causes your genitals to itch, it is possible you have an infection. Strong smelling discharge and pain or bleeding in the vagina (when you are not on your menstrual period) may also be signs of infection. You should see a health worker if you experience any of these changes.

You are unlikely to experience these problems if you practice good hygiene and use condoms in every sexual relationship. When taken care of properly, the vagina is a perfectly-balanced, self-regulating environment. All you need to do is gently wash the genital area daily with clean water and bath soap, separating the outer lips to clean away secretions that collect there.

THE INTERNAL GENITALS AND THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE

Around two years after the beginning of puberty, usually between the ages of 10 and 16, many girls begin having menstrual periods (also called monthly periods). Menarche (the beginning of menstruation) is a sign that big changes have taken place inside a young woman’s body. It also means that she could become pregnant if she has unprotected sexual intercourse with a boy or man.

During puberty hormones cause the ovaries, two egg-shaped organs, to mature and to start releasing an egg (or ovum) each month. The eggs are so small they cannot be seen without a microscope. Every female is born with thousands of eggs in her ovaries.

Before the ovum matures each month, a soft lining begins to form in the uterus. This is how the uterus prepares itself to receive a fertilised egg. If there is no fertilisation, the lining of the uterus will break down, pass through the cervix, and out of the vagina. This is menstruation, or a menstrual period. Because the lining is made of blood vessels, it is called menstrual blood.

Girls who have started menstruating have monthly cycles. For the first few years, most girls’ menstrual cycles are very irregular, and they can’t tell when they will get their periods. There seems to be no pattern to it, and they sometimes will go several months without getting their periods at all. This is normal, and after a few years the menstrual cycle will become more regular. Some women never have a regular cycle, and this is also normal.

Even when it is regular, the length of the menstrual cycle varies for different women. For some the cycle is as short as 21 or (even fewer) days. For others, it is as long as 35 days. The average cycle is 28 days. Let’s look at the 28-day menstrual cycle of the average woman:

On Day 1 she starts to bleed. For the next 3 to 8 days her body will be shedding the lining from the walls of her uterus since it knows there is not going to be a pregnancy that month. The woman loses about 60-70 ml of blood, which is a small amount. Immediately another egg starts maturing. The egg will ripen in one of her ovaries, and soon afterward the uterus will start to build up another lining.
Halfway through the cycle—sometime around Day 14 or two weeks after she started bleeding—the mature egg is released from the ovary and floats down the fallopian tube on its way to the uterus. The egg spends a few days (2 to 5) inside the fallopian tube and if it meets a sperm there, it can be fertilised and the woman could become pregnant. This is the **fertile period**, when a woman’s chances of becoming pregnant are highest (see Chapter 11 for more on pregnancy). If the egg isn’t fertilised, it goes into the uterus, down through the cervix and vagina, and out of a woman’s body. This will be around Day 20. We do not notice the egg leaving our bodies.

About a week later, when her body realises that there has been no fertilisation, the lining of the uterus will collapse again and come out as menstrual bleeding, and the cycle begins all over again.

That is how the menstrual cycle works. Many women assume that their fertile period is right in the middle of their cycle, but this is only true for women with a regular 28-day cycle. For women with shorter or longer cycles, the fertile period will not be in the middle of the cycle. This is because **ovulation** (the release of an egg) occurs about 14 days before the next menstrual bleeding begins. This means that a woman who has a 21-day cycle probably ovulates around Day 7, whereas a woman with a 35-day cycle probably ovulates around Day 21. Also bear in mind that the ovum takes a few days to travel down the fallopian tube so the fertile period lasts several (4-5) days.

The menstrual cycle is especially irregular during adolescence, and it can be affected by stress, sorrow, travel, and other changes in a girl’s life. Therefore it is very difficult to know when the fertile period will occur. Many girls have an unintended pregnancy because they have sex during what they think are their “safe days”—the days when they think that the chances of pregnancy are low.

Having sex on “safe days” is not an effective way for anyone to avoid unintended pregnancies, but especially for adolescents and young women. Menstrual cycles can be very irregular during adolescence, and even if your periods have been consistently regular they can suddenly become irregular. Also, if you have intercourse in your fertile period, you can get pregnant even before your period starts. There are much better and more effective ways to prevent unintended pregnancies, such as abstaining from sexual intercourse and practicing safer sex by using condoms and contraceptives. You can find more information about contraceptives in Chapters 10 and 11.

It is also very important to keep in mind that there are no “safe days” against HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. You can get infected every day of the month which is why it is important to use latex condoms when you are having sexual relations.
THE FIRST MENSTRUATION, OR MENARCHE

Starting to menstruate can be a significant event in a girl’s life. Many girls can remember the exact day they started.

NATASHA, 13, JAMAICA

“I REMEMBER IT WAS ON JUNE 10. I WOKE UP AND FOUND I HAD BLOOD ON MY CLOTHES. I WENT AND TOLD MY MOTHER. SHE GAVE ME A SANITARY NAPKIN AND EXPLAINED TO ME THAT IF I CAN’T FIND A SANITARY NAPKIN I COULD USE CLEAN CLOTH!”

Menstruation means that your body is developing and working in a new way. Once you begin to menstruate, you can become pregnant if you have vaginal sex with a man. Still, menstruation does not mean you are emotionally and physically ready to be sexually active or to give birth. The vagina and pelvis of young girls and women are still small until about the age of 18 to 20, when they become fully developed.

Though menstruation is a normal and healthy part of a woman’s life, some girls and young women are very shocked and unhappy when they first menstruate—usually because they do not know what it is, or they think that something is wrong.

CHRISTINE, 17, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

“IT CAME TO ME AS A SHOCK SINCE I HAD NEVER HAD ANY KNOWLEDGE ABOUT IT. THEN MY MOTHER EXPLAINED TO ME WHY I HAD TO GO THROUGH IT.”

MERLENE, 19, BELIZE

“I WAS UNSURE OF WHAT WAS GOING ON. I HAD NO INFORMATION ON HOW TO DEAL WITH IT. MENSTRUATION MADE ME MISERABLE.”

Girls who know what to expect from menstruation often find it easier to experience this change and feel better able to handle it.

BEVERLY, 13, GUYANA

“I HAVE NOT STARTED MY MENSTRUAL PERIOD YET. WHEN I DO I WILL TELL MY MOTHER SO SHE CAN HELP ME BUY SANITARY NAPKINS.”
You will know that you have started to menstruate when a little blood comes out of your vagina and stains your underwear. The blood does not pour like water from a tap; rather, it dribbles out slowly. Usually by the time you notice a feeling of unusual wetness, your panties have absorbed most of the blood and the rest of your clothes will be fine.

But sometimes there is more blood or it comes more suddenly.

If this happens to you, try to stay cool. It’s not your fault—you didn’t know it was going to start! It takes everyone some time before they figure out how to deal with their menstrual period.

**DO YOU KNOW the facts about menstruation?**

Here are some common questions and answers about menstruation:

1. **How much blood will I lose each month?** Over the whole monthly menstrual period, the average woman only loses about 60-70 ml of blood. If you measure 70 ml in a glass you will see that it is not very much! However, this is just an average. Some women lose even less—just a few tablespoons of blood a month—while others lose up to a cupful.

2. **If I keep track on a calendar, can I know which days are my safe days when I won’t get pregnant?** No, you cannot. The “safe days” method is generally not effective preventing pregnancies for anyone, especially adolescents. This is because girls and young women can have irregular periods so they cannot predict their safe days. In addition, there are no safe days against infection with HIV and other STIs. You can get infected with STIs any day. Safe days are not a good way to protect yourself!

3. **Can I menstruate twice in one month?** Yes, look at the following section. Susan menstruated twice in April.

4. **Can I have sex during menstruation?** This is not a good idea, especially if it is unprotected sex (sex without a condom or other barrier method). If you have HIV, the HIV will be in your menstrual blood so your partner could easily become infected. But you are also at risk. If your sexual partner is infected with HIV or any other STI, you are more likely to get infected during your period than at any other time of the month.

5. **Does sex cure menstrual cramps?** No, sexual intercourse will not cure menstrual cramps. It’s just a myth that young people pass around.
KEEPING A CALENDAR

It can take some time for many girls to get used to menstruation. If you feel unhappy or worried about it, your feelings are perfectly normal, but try to remember that menstruation is a sign of physical maturity and health. You should also know that most women stop having their periods in their late 40s or 50s. This time is called menopause.

Many girls find it helpful to keep a record of when they menstruate each month. This helps them have some idea of when they might menstruate so that they can prepare for it, even if their periods are irregular. You can buy a small calendar and mark with an X the day you start to bleed. By counting the days between the X’s, you will soon see how long and how regular (or irregular) your cycle is.

Susan, age 19, has a regular 28-day cycle. In April, she started to bleed on April 1st. So her next period started on April 29. In May she started menstruating on May 27. In June she menstruated on June 23. In July she started menstruating on July 20. In August she started on the 16th.

Did you notice that her period started on a different day each month, even though she has a perfectly regular cycle?

Remember, the calendar method is a good way to help you prepare for your periods. But it’s not a good way to know when your “safe days” will be. If you are sexually active, you should practice safer sex to protect yourself against pregnancy and against STIs, including HIV and AIDS (see Chapters 10 and 11).

DISCOMFORT WITH PERIODS

Many girls have swelling and tenderness in their breasts just before their monthly period starts or when they ovulate. This is not very comfortable, but it is normal. The soreness is caused by hormones, which make the breast tissue hold more water than normal. Wearing a well-fitting bra can help you feel more comfortable, and eating less salty food will help reduce the amount of water that your body stores.

Periods can affect one’s mood too. Some girls feel tearful or depressed right before their period starts each month. Sometimes girls feel bad tempered because their breasts feel sore or their body feels a bit swollen and bloated. This moodiness is called “premenstrual tension” or “premenstrual syndrome” and it is a common condition.

Many girls experience a bit of low back or abdominal pain or cramps during their period. These cramps happen because the muscles of the uterus are contracting while the lining is shedding. The cramps are normal and can be managed. If the pain is strong, lie down and try to completely relax your body by breathing deeply and slowly. You can also gently massage your abdomen and lower back. Alternatively, placing a hot water bottle or a heating pad on your abdomen and lower stomach can give relief. If this does not work, try a painkiller from a pharmacy or shop.
Exercise can also help, even though this may not be your first instinct. You might feel like lying down, but taking a brisk walk or going for a run actually helps some girls deal with their cramps. If you use tampons, you can even try swimming. Having your period shouldn’t prevent you from doing things you enjoy!

Menstrual cramps and pains are usually a feature of early adolescence, and may not bother you as much when you are older, though some women can continue to have uncomfortable periods and heavy bleeding.

If you have severe menstrual discomforts (terrible period pains or very heavy bleeding) you should see a health worker. Some health workers will prescribe contraceptive pills to relieve heavy, painful periods. The pills make menstrual periods more regular and reduce the amount of bleeding each month. If you need to consult a health worker about your periods, ask about contraceptive pills. You can take these pills even if you have not been or are not sexually active. The pills contain very low doses of the hormones that naturally occur in your body and they are safe for adolescents. You should not take oral contraceptives without seeing a health worker first.

If you do not want to take these pills, ask the health worker what else you can do to reduce menstrual discomfort. You should not have to stop your normal activities because of a problem that can be easily solved.

You may also need to see a health worker if you start bleeding or spotting between periods or if your period lasts more than eight days.

SEX AND MENSTRUATION

Some people have sex during menstruation. This is perfectly acceptable, but bear in mind that menstruation does not prevent pregnancy or HIV or STI infection. In fact, having sex during menstruation increases the risk of getting STIs, including HIV. Menstrual blood is a rich environment in which bacteria, fungi, and viruses can grow very quickly. If a woman or girl who is menstruating has vaginal sex with a man or boy who has an STI, she is more likely to get infected than during other times of her monthly cycle. This is because the opening of the cervix is wider than usual so that the menstrual blood can flow out. The STI can travel up into the uterus and fallopian tubes and can cause an infection in the female reproductive organs, which can lead to infertility.

For the boy or man, having sex with a girl or woman who is menstruating is also risky. If she is infected with HIV, her menstrual blood will be rich with the virus. Therefore, if you are sexually active, you should never have sex—especially during menstruation—without a latex condom.
COMFORT, HEALTH, AND HYGIENE

Menstrual blood is clean, but once it leaves the body, bacteria, and fungi grow quickly in it, which is why good hygiene is especially important during menstruation. While menstruating, wash yourself more than once a day to keep clean. Do not use deodorants or perfumes on your genitals as they can cause irritation.

Here are some tips to make your periods easier and more comfortable:

- Be prepared—keep track of when your periods are due so you aren’t caught by surprise.
- Avoid eating too much salt. Salt causes your body to retain extra water, especially around the time of your periods. This can add to your feeling of heaviness, the swelling of your abdomen and legs, tension, and depression.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Eat foods that are rich in iron like fish, beans, meat, and lots of green vegetables. This will help you to replace the iron lost in bleeding.

WHAT TO USE

Women and girls have always menstruated and coped with it even when there were none of the sanitary products that you can buy in stores and pharmacies today. So even if you choose not to purchase pads or tampons, you will be able to handle your periods well.

One of the cheapest things to use is clean cloths. You can cut them to fit your panty area, sewing several layers of cloths on top of each other. Make sure that they are clean. Wash them thoroughly with cold water and hang them in a sunny place to dry. The sun is a very good disinfectant and kills germs. Toilet tissue is also inexpensive. You will need to make a thick long wad of toilet tissue. But toilet tissue is usually rough and it can cause irritation and soreness to your skin.

Pads are also good. They are designed to fit neatly between your body and your panties. They have strips of tape that keep them attached to your panties, and your panties help to hold the pads close to the opening of the vagina. Pads have a plastic lining to minimize leakage. If you use pads, you need to dispose of them correctly after use. Do not flush them down the toilet, as they will block the pipes.

Some women choose to use tampons, which are small, hard cotton cylinders that are pushed up into the vagina during menstruation. The cotton softens as it absorbs all the blood that comes into the vagina from the uterus. Attached to the tampon is a short soft cotton thread, which hangs out of the vagina. You pull this thread to remove the tampon.

One nice thing about tampons is that you cannot feel them at all, but they are not always recommended since the bleaches used to whiten the cotton can cause irritation; also using tampons will require extra care. If you choose to use them occasionally, always wash your hands before and after inserting a tampon. You also need to change tampons frequently (every three hours), as you can get an infection in your vagina if you leave a tampon in for an extended period time. Avoid using tampons at night because you sleep longer than three hours.

Whatever you use, clean cloths, toilet tissue, pads, or tampons, change them frequently to avoid staining. When menstrual blood comes in contact with air, bacteria grow quickly and develop an odour. If your panties or clothes get stained with blood, soak them in cold water. Hot water will cause the blood to set and remain as a permanent stain.

Your menstrual period is part of you. If you prepare for it, you will find that it isn’t such a big hassle. You can be active, do all the things you enjoy, and still have fun during your periods—they shouldn’t cause you to stop your daily routine.
Summary of Chapter 4

Girls

During puberty, you can expect many changes to occur in your body. Here are some of the changes you can expect:

• Your body will grow, especially the bones in your hips, arms, legs, and feet. Around this time girls notice their bodies taking on a curvier shape.

• Your breasts will develop and your nipples will become larger and perhaps darker.

• Your genitals will mature, and the walls of your vagina will begin to produce fluid or discharge.

• Your ovary will release an egg each month, and you will begin to menstruate as the lining of the uterus is shed.

Whenever these changes occur in your body is the right time. As you undergo these changes, there are a few things to keep in mind:

• There are a variety of breast shapes and sizes, all of which are normal.

• Wash and clean your external genitals every day. Try to wear cotton panties.

• It is necessary to pay attention to your normal vaginal discharge so that you can notice any changes that might be a sign of a vaginal infection.

• “Safe days” are not a good method of contraception for anyone, especially for adolescents. This is because an adolescent girl’s menstrual cycle can be very irregular. There are no “safe days” against getting pregnant, and there are never any safe days against HIV and other STIs.

• Keep a record of your menstrual cycle and prepare yourself for menstrual periods.

• Although cramps, swelling, and mood swings are normal, your menstrual cycle does not have to be uncomfortable. Exercise and low-salt diets can help reduce some of these problems. If you have terrible pains or bleed very heavily, you should see a health worker.

• A girl can get pregnant even before she starts having her periods.

• Tampons are not really recommended for adolescents. If you use one, remove it after three hours.
This chapter is about how to take care of your overall health. Knowing how to stay healthy is very important because many health problems can be avoided altogether if you eat well, exercise, practise good hygiene, and feel good about yourself.

Now that you are not a child anymore, it is your responsibility to take care of your body so you can look and feel as good as possible. It is the only one you will ever have, so take care of it!

KEEPING CLEAN, SMELLING NICE

Everybody wants to look nice, but feeling attractive can be especially important during adolescence because of all the big changes you experience. Not only does your body change shape during puberty, but it starts producing new smells and new fluids. You may find these changes both interesting and worrisome at times. Practising good hygiene is one very good way to feel more comfortable with your changing body.

Good hygiene is especially important during adolescence because your skin begins producing more fluids than it did when you were a child, and some of these fluids can cause unpleasant smells when you do not bathe.

The main fluid you may notice is sweat. Sweat, which is mostly water, is produced by glands in the skin. The sweat glands become much more active when you reach puberty, so many adolescents notice that they sweat a lot. They also notice that their sweat takes on a different smell and taste than the simple watery sweat of a child who has been running in the sun.

Your armpits have many sweat glands, but you also have many sweat glands in your hands, feet, and even your genitals, and you perspire more in these places too. The smell of your perspiration will change during puberty, but these changes in body odour are natural and healthy. They are signs of growing up.

Bathe at least once a day to stay fresh and clean.
Although some people worry about the smell of their sweat, and especially their underarm perspiration, bathing regularly and wearing clean clothing is enough to keep you fresh and clean. If you perspire a lot and it bothers you, wear cotton underwear and loose cotton clothes. Cotton is more absorbent than synthetic materials, and it allows air to flow through the cloth, which helps keep you cooler. Some people use deodorants (roll-on, cream, or spray) to prevent underarm odour, which you can also decide to use.

Like sweat, other bodily fluids—menstrual blood, vaginal fluids, semen and smegma—are basically clean. But once these fluids leave the body, bacteria and fungi can grow in them, causing bad smells or sometimes infection. Therefore, it is important to clean the genital area—around the vagina and penis—daily. Boys and young men who are not circumcised need to pull back the foreskin and gently clean away the smegma (see Chapter 3).

Girls need to clean in between the inner and outer lips of the vulva, but they do not need to clean inside the vagina with soaps because the vagina cleans and protects itself with its own vaginal discharge. Good hygiene is especially important during your menstrual periods (see Chapter 4).

Using ordinary bathing soap to wash your genitals is fine, but you should not use strong antiseptic soaps or deodorants in the genital area because they can cause irritation. In addition, strong soaps can kill good bacteria and fungi that live in places like the vagina and that help protect against certain infections. After washing, always dry yourself and put on clean underwear.

If you have dry skin, putting some body lotion, Vaseline, coconut oil, or cocoa butter on your hands, arms, and legs will help. Putting on lotion just after bathing helps to keep moisture in your skin.

Wash your hands frequently to keep away bacteria, especially after using the toilet and before eating or preparing food. Keeping your nails short can help keep them clean.

CARING FOR YOUR TEETH

Your mouth is another place where bacteria live, so taking care of your teeth is important in practising good hygiene. The bacteria in your mouth can eat holes (cavities) into the teeth, which can be very painful. Decayed teeth can also cause infections that may affect other parts of your body.

Brushing your teeth at least twice a day—after meals and before going to sleep—can help kill bacteria that feed on the food particles in your mouth and cause tooth decay and gum disease. Keeping your teeth clean can also help to make sure your breath smells fresh.

You should clean the surface of every tooth, both in the front and the back of your mouth and in between your teeth. Toothbrushes and toothpaste are best, but if you don’t have toothpaste, even rinsing and brushing with clean water will work fine. You can also clean your teeth with a little salt and water, which will help prevent gum and mouth infections.

It is important to avoid sharing toothbrushes because this can spread illnesses. Also try to avoid eating a lot of sweet foods and sodas. Besides having little nutritional value, they cause tooth decay.

PIMPLES

During puberty, the oil glands in your skin become more active, and they start producing an oily substance called sebum. These oil glands are spread throughout your skin and all over your body. They are especially numerous on your face, neck, shoulders, upper chest, and back.

Sebum is a good substance because it helps keep your skin soft, elastic, and young-looking. During adolescence, your oil glands can produce too much sebum which then blocks the pores (small openings) in your skin, causing pimples.
Some teenagers have a lot of pimples, which is called acne. Some people have acne as teenagers and into their adulthood. The oiliness of your skin and how much sebum you produce during puberty determine how vulnerable you are to pimples. It is normal and common to have pimples. In fact, 8 out of 10 teenagers have pimples sometime during adolescence. Pimples are most common between the ages of 14 and 17, but you can get pimples before or after these ages.

Stress may be a factor in getting pimples. Many teenagers find that they get a lot of pimples just before an important event that they are very nervous or excited about like graduation, a match, or exams. Some girls notice that they get more pimples just before their menstrual periods.

WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT PIMPLES?

Pimples are a normal part of adolescence and there is no way to avoid them altogether. Nor are there any miracle cures for acne. However, there are a few things you can do to help.

Keeping your skin clean is very important, especially if you live in hot, dusty, or humid places. You can use a bathing soap and warm water to gently wash areas where your skin is oily like your face, neck, shoulders, back, and upper chest. Washing these areas at least once a day will help remove the oil from the surface of the skin and keep your pores clean and open.

Do not wash your skin too much or use strong, harsh soaps or detergents because they can irritate your skin and make pimples worse. You should also make sure that any oils and grease that you put on your hair do not get on your face because they can also block the pores in your skin. Lastly, be careful about using certain face creams and skin lighteners. Even though the packaging may promise to give you clear, beautiful skin, some creams may actually make things worse. In addition, many skin lighteners and bleaches contain substances that are very unhealthy.

Although it may be tempting at times, it is not a good idea to squeeze pimples or pick at them. If you do this, the pus can spread the infection to other pores. You can also get permanent scars.

Pimples are a normal part of adolescence. A lot of teenagers feel as though they are the only person with acne or pimples, but that is mainly because they don’t notice that their peers have them too. Your pimples are much more noticeable to you than they are to anyone else. You may think that everyone is staring at them, seeing only your skin and not you. But people have many other things to think about and what they really notice is who you are, not what your skin looks like.

You will not have them forever. Don’t let a few pimples get you down!
BODY PIERCING AND TATTOOS

Before you decide to get a tattoo or body piercing, you must know that:

- Unsterile tattooing and piercing equipment and needles can spread serious infection, hepatitis, tetanus, or possibly even HIV.

- Tattoo removal is very expensive. Tattoos are not easy to remove and in some cases may cause permanent discoloration. Think carefully before getting a tattoo. You can’t take it back if you don’t like it.

- Some people are allergic to the tattoo dye. Their body will work to reject the tattoo.

- Blood donations cannot be made for a year after getting a tattoo, body piercing, or permanent makeup.

If you still choose to do it, here are some tips:

- Visit several tattooists or piercers before you decide to go ahead with this. Be sure their work areas are clean, that they sterilise their equipment, use packaged needles, and throw away needles and leftover ink.

- Do not use a piercing gun since it crushes the tissue pierced and cannot be sterilised properly.

- Use non-toxic metals such as surgical steel, 14k gold, niobium, or titanium to avoid infections and allergic reactions and choose a type of jewelry that accommodates the swelling that follows the piercing procedure.

- Both piercing and tattooing require very careful care for a long period. Caring for a tattoo is similar to caring for a minor burn. Follow instructions from the tattooist very carefully, and be attentive to allergic reactions. If a skin reaction or an infection develops, seek specialised help immediately.

HAIR CARE

We have hair all over our body, but especially on our heads, armpits and around the genitals. Taking care of your hair is another part of practising good hygiene and taking good care of your body.

The hair on your head is pretty easy to care for especially if you keep it short. Whether you keep your hair short, natural, braided, or permed, you should wash it to keep it free from dust and dirt. Try not to share hair combs because this can spread lice or ringworm (a fungal infection). If you do share combs, make sure your hair is healthy and carefully wash the comb with hot soapy water before and after using it.

Some people have dandruff, which happens when the skin on your head is very dry and flakes off. There are special medicated shampoos that may help control your dandruff.

Simple, regular bathing is necessary to keep your body hair clean. As you read in Chapter 2, this hair serves a good purpose: it keeps sweat and dirt away from your skin. However, some people choose to remove or trim some of this hair. For example, some people feel the genitals look nicer without hair, while others think it is better to keep their genital hair for good hygiene.
Armpit hair can be trimmed or removed with special hair-removing creams or shaved. If you want to shave it, the best way to do it is while you are bathing, using abundant soap or shaving cream and a good razor. This will help prevent cuts or abrasions. Avoid using deodorant shortly after shaving or use a deodorant without alcohol. Also, never share razors with anyone else or use a rusty razor.

DEON, 18, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
"WHEN I WAS IN STANDARD 6, I STARTED TO GROW PUBIC HAIR. MY MOTHER TOLD ME THAT I MUST WASH VERY WELL, OTHERWISE I WILL SMELL."

SANDRA, 13, ST. LUCIA
"I HAVE SEEN HAIR IN MY ARMPITS. IT IS NOT TOO LONG SO I WILL NOT HAVE TO TRIM IT."

If you would like to trim your pubic hair, always use clean scissors. Do not shave or use hair-removing creams in the pubic area. These creams will irritate and hurt the delicate skin this area, and shaving also has risks. If you shave your pubic hair, you may make some very small cuts in the skin. If you have sex, these cuts are like open doors for HIV to pass through, which is dangerous. Also, when shaved pubic hair grows back, the hairs are so sharp that they can pierce a condom. Thirdly, the naked pubic area tends to get little infections around the hair follicles or the base of where the hair grows. Trimming pubic hair a little bit is safe when done carefully.

EATING WELL

Good nutrition is essential for good health. Eating a nutritious and balanced diet is important throughout life, but it is especially important during childhood and adolescence when your body is growing and developing very fast.

Your body needs healthful food to grow and to give you energy for doing well in school, playing sports, and doing work. Sometimes young people don’t eat a nutritious diet and they forget to stick to regular meal times. They may skip meals and snack on biscuits, chips, sweets, chocolate, and soda. These foods aren’t very nutritious, and your body needs a lot more than this to stay healthy.

Different types of food do different jobs in your body so you need to eat meals with each type of food. Look at the illustration and description of the food groups and compare it with your eating habits. How well do you normally eat? How can you improve your diet?

- **Bread, cereal, rice, and pasta group.** These foods provide energy and include staple foods such as cereals (rice, wheat flour, pasta) and starchy fruits, roots, and tubers (green bananas, plantain, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, dasheen, cassava, etc.). The best sources of energy are whole grains such as oatmeal, whole wheat bread, and brown rice since they take longer to digest and provide you with more energy over a longer period of time.

- **Vegetable group.** This group includes dark green leafy and/or yellow vegetables. These vegetables (pumpkin, carrot, callaloo/baghi, dasheen leaves, cabbage bush, kale, spinach) are important because they contain carotene, a substance that the body transforms into vitamin A, which helps improve your night vision. The dark green leafy vegetables also contain iron. Iron is especially important for girls and women because they need more iron when they are menstruating or during pregnancy. Also, a diet rich in vegetables reduces the risk of heart attack, high blood pressure, intestinal problems, and adds it variety to your diet.
• **Fruit group.** Most fruits (mango, guava, citrus, pineapple, West Indian cherry, pawpaw/papaya, golden apple/june plum, sugar apple/sweet sop) are a rich source of vitamin C, especially when eaten fresh. Vitamin C helps the body use iron from other foods. Fruit also helps reduce the risk of heart attack and high blood pressure.

• **Milk, yogurt, and cheese.** You need calcium, vitamin D, and regular exercise to strengthen your bones. Dairy products such as milk, yogurt, and cheese are important sources of calcium. Since these dairy products contain saturated fats, which are not healthy for you, stick to no-fat or low-fat dairy products whenever possible.

• **Meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, and nuts.** These are important sources of protein which is called the building block of the body. Protein helps your body to grow and develop properly, especially during adolescence. It also helps the body heal and repair itself when you get hurt. Try to eat more white meat (fish and poultry) which is low in fat and less red meat which is rich in bad (saturated) fats. Dry beans (legumes) are an excellent source of fibre, vitamins, and minerals, while nuts (almonds, walnuts, pecans, peanuts, etc.) contain healthy fats.

• **Fat, oils, and sweets.** Fats are also a source of energy. Some fats, such as soya oil, coconut oil, avocado, dried coconut, and Jamaican ackee come from plants and are good sources of unsaturated fats. Others, such as butter or ghee that come from animals, should be avoided. Because there is so much energy in fat, your body only needs small amounts of it. In fact, eating too much fat can cause some health problems in the long run. Another source of energy is sugar, but sweets are bad for your teeth and can lead to weight gain, diabetes, heart disease, and other disorders. Fresh fruits and sugar cane, which are naturally sweet, are better snacks than sweets.

A nutritious diet includes many different types of food, in differing amounts.
Basic Body Care

In short, a balanced diet should include:

- Lots of fruits and vegetables.
- Plenty of ground provisions and cereals.
- Moderate amounts of foods from animals, beans and nuts.
- Small amounts of dairy products.
- Very small amounts of fats, oils and sugar.

In some contexts and because of cultural and fashion demands, some girls and boys are very conscious about their weight. While this concern may be helpful to a point, you should never take this concern to extremes. Make sure you eat a balanced diet every day. One thing you should never do is “make up” for an eating “binge” by forcing yourself to throw up (see next box for bulimia and anorexia), by taking laxatives, or by avoiding food after you feel you have overeaten. This is not good for you and can lead to serious long-term health problems.

**DO YOU KNOW about anorexia and bulimia?**

Anorexia and bulimia are eating disorders that both women and men can have, although they tend to be more frequent among young women. They are emotional and mental conditions, in which a person has a fear of gaining weight and may refuse to eat, even though they may be really skinny. People with anorexia or bulimia may also be exercising in order to lose weight. Some people with bulimia will try to make themselves sick, by using excessive laxatives or vomiting to eliminate the food in their bodies. People with anorexia and bulimia are afraid of being fat, and may tend to see themselves as overweight even though they have a normal weight and shape. Although anorexia and bulimia are normally seen in Caucasian contexts they are beginning to appear among African descents in the Caribbean.

**What causes anorexia?**

It is believed that anorexia is a combination of biological, social, and psychological factors.

**Biological causes:** Studies show that higher levels of serotonin (a brain chemical) can cause a person to withdraw socially and not want food. However, the higher level of serotonin may be caused by the anorexia, rather than be a cause of it. Individuals with anorexia often have family members with the disorder.

**Social causes:** The cultural or social environment may cause or contribute to one’s likelihood of suffering from anorexia. Some cultures value being thin as the key to being attractive, especially for women. Thus, social pressure can be a cause of anorexia. It is also a sign of low self-esteem.

**Psychological and emotional causes:** Major life events (life transitions, emotional upsets, or sexual or physical abuse) can sometimes trigger anorexia. Mental health experts think that the feelings of being overwhelmed and powerless in adolescence can bring about a desire to maintain control in some part of your life; this part might be controlling one’s body weight to stay extra thin.

**What are the effects of anorexia?**

Anorexia can have severe medical consequences. Because the anorexic individual does not consume enough calories or nutrients to support the maintenance and growth of the body, all body processes slow down to conserve energy. This slowing down can have serious effects on a person’s physical, emotional, and behavioral well-being.
Physical effects: loss of the menstrual periods, lowered resistance to illness, fainting, fatigue, and overall weakness, etc.

Emotional and behavioral effects: isolation from family and friends, loss of concentration, depression, irritability, etc.

What is the treatment for anorexia?

Treatment for anorexia involves both the body and the mind. Early treatment for anorexia may include behavioural, psychological, or nutritional therapy, massage, and/or relaxation exercises. It also involves the support of the whole family circle of the person with anorexia.

If you feel that you may be suffering from anorexia or bulimia, or think that one of your friends is, consult with a trusted adult (parent, health care worker, or teacher) to see how best you can help yourself or your friend. Sometimes people with these disorders deny they have a problem—you can help them out!

HOW MUCH AND WHAT KIND OF ENERGY DOES YOUR BODY NEED?

The energy you need depends on how much energy you use up. All the growth during adolescence takes up a lot of energy. In fact, adolescents need more energy than most adults.

Energy is measured in calories. If you consume more energy or calories than your body needs during the day, the extra calories will be stored as fat for a time when it is needed. For most people this is healthy and normal, but it can be a problem if you have too much fat. Obesity, which is an excessive build up of body fat, can weaken physical health and well-being, and can shorten life expectancy. Unfortunately, obese people are also often made fun of unfairly due to their appearance. We need to be particularly careful not to tease people for being unusual or different than the norm.

Sometimes it can be hard to get the right amount of exercise and eat a balanced diet. Even though fried food can be prepared quickly and conveniently, eating it in excess can cause you to be unhealthy. Also, try to avoid eating sugary foods and drinks in excess. To stay in good health try to maintain a balanced diet, drink lots of water, and exercise regularly.

EXERCISE

Everyone needs exercise: children, adolescents, adults, girls, and boys. Exercise makes you feel stronger because it strengthens your heart and lungs, builds your muscles, and thickens your bones. It makes you better able to resist disease by boosting your immune system and can help you sleep.

Exercise has some other benefits. It can improve your mood, build your self-confidence, help you make friends, and make you feel good. If you are feeling stressed, moody or sad, go for a fast walk or play a game of football. Anything that gets your heart pounding can lift your spirits.

Exercise can also be a good way to work on some important life skills, like confidence, coordination and teamwork. Many people learn and practice these skills when they are playing sports or when they join a team.

KIZZEL, 19, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

"WHEN I STARTED EXERCISING I FELT A LOT BETTER ABOUT MYSELF. I WAS CALM AND ABLE TO THINK THROUGH MY CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS MORE CLEARLY."
Getting plenty of exercise doesn’t mean that you have to join a sports club. Helping with work on a farm, in a garden, or around the house can be good exercise. Making yourself useful at home can also improve your relationship with your parents.

You should get plenty of exercise even if you don’t think you are athletic. Everyone’s body needs to be used, stretched, pushed, and tested. As you exercise, you may find that you enjoy it more and more. You might even turn into an athlete before you know it!

Exercising can be difficult at first, especially if you are not used to it. You may find that you get out of breath when you run. It may feel unpleasant and turn you off exercise. Start gradually. Find an activity you like and build up your strength so that you can begin to do it more and more. The aim is to get your heart pounding and feel that you are breathing faster than normal. Try to do this for at least 20 minutes, 3 times a week.

Keep up your exercise routine and you may notice your skin is brighter, your eyes glow, you feel happier and calmer, more confident, and better able to handle difficulties. You will be stronger and healthier too. Keep it up! Don’t let exam time stop you from exercising. It is during exams and other stressful times that you need exercise the most.

You can improve your posture through regular exercise; try to sit up and to stand straight. Poor posture can lead to aches and pain in your chest and back.

REST

Along with good food and plenty of exercise, you need to get enough rest. Resting allows your body to store up more energy. You can rest by relaxing your mind and body or by sleeping.

Take time to relax each day by reading a book, doing something you enjoy, listening to the radio, or simply reflecting on your life. Watching television can be relaxing, but try to avoid spending too much time watching television, DVDs, or videos. Your mind doesn’t fully relax when you are watching or playing electronic games.

Sleep is an especially important form of rest. Only when you are asleep does your heart slow down and your muscles relax. This allows your body to recover and repair itself from stress or injury. You need a lot of sleep during adolescence because your body uses up a lot of energy. Most people need about eight hours of sleep every night, though some people need less and others more. If you are tired all the time, make sure that you are going to bed early enough. All the changes your body is going through are very demanding, so be sure you give it a chance to rest!
Summary of Chapter 5

Basic Body Care

There are a few simple and basic things you need to know about taking good care of your body.

- As you reach puberty, you will start to perspire more. Bathing will keep you clean and smelling nice.

- Clean your teeth at least twice a day to avoid tooth decay (cavities) and to have fresh breath.

- If your oil glands produce too much sebum (an oily substance), you may develop pimples. Pimples are a normal part of adolescence, and there is no way to avoid them altogether. Keeping your skin clean with water and a mild bathing soap is the best solution. But do not wash your skin too much, and do not use strong laundry soaps because they can damage your skin.

- Eat a nutritious diet full of fruits and vegetables, legumes and nuts, and foods from animals. Avoid eating too many sweets and fried foods. Drink lots of water.

- Get plenty of exercise. Exercise strengthens your heart, lungs and muscles, keeps you fit, and lifts your spirits.

- All the changes you are going through are very demanding, so give your body a chance to rest and sleep around eight hours per night.

By practicing good hygiene, eating well, drinking plenty of water, exercising properly, and resting, you will allow your body to function at its best. You will feel good physically, which will also help you feel good emotionally.