Adolescence: The Big Change, The Big Challenge

Patrick, 16, Kenya
“What I have enjoyed about being an adolescent is taking care of the responsibilities of home in the absence of parents. And I like this because I think I have grown and can control myself and the young ones.”

Naana, 17, Ghana
“There are many things about being an adolescent that I don’t like. I remember when I was younger I had more freedom than I have now. There are so many rules and regulations.”

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

Of course, you have always been special and always will be. But for now you are extra special. You are going through a lot of changes and trying out new things—from new looks and new identities to new experiences, like going out with friends, holding hands and kissing.
Your new looks and identities may make your parents, aunties and uncles very nervous because they don't want you to get hurt, and they don't want you to make a big mistake, such as getting yourself (or a girlfriend) pregnant while you are still in school. Most of all, they are nervous because they know that these years will have a big impact on the person you are going to become and the kind of life you are going to lead.

WHAT IS ADOLESCENCE?

Adolescence is the time when you change and grow physically and mentally from a child into an adult. During adolescence a lot of things start happening:

• Your body will change—in ways that you like and some that you don't.
• You will start to have sexual feelings, and you may not always know what you should do about these feelings.
• You will start to think independently and want to make decisions for yourself.
• Your feelings about your family and your relationship with your parents may change—in good ways and bad. Your parents may give you more responsibilities, which is a nice sign that they trust and rely on you. But they might also start being very strict—keeping you from your friends and trying to make decisions for you about your schooling or your future. They might also seem less affectionate towards you than before, and you may miss the easy, loving relationships you had as a child.
• Your friends—and what they think—may matter to you much more than they used to.
• Your emotions may be much more complicated than they used to be, and sometimes you yourself may not understand exactly what you are feeling or why.
• You may really want to feel loved and to feel close to someone.
• You may face difficult decisions, and there may be times when you don't always know whom to turn to for advice.

Adolescence is a special time for everyone, everywhere—from Tanzania to Togo. But it's also a challenging time. This is a time of big change, and big changes take time. You'll face a lot of decisions as you go through adolescence, and some of the choices you make will stay with you for the rest of your life.

There's a lot that you can do to get through adolescence safely. You can make sure you understand your body and the changes that are taking place. You can also make sure that you understand yourself and what you want out of life. Take time to think about your future and to plan for it. Adulthood is a big responsibility, so you must prepare for it well during your adolescence.

You don't have to go through adolescence alone. You are surrounded by people who deal with serious problems on a daily basis. You have a large extended family—aunties, uncles and
many cousins—to whom you can turn for advice. In addition, you are part of a rich culture, and you have rich traditions to draw on as you go through adolescence.

Adolescence has always been complicated everywhere, but today young people face problems their parents and grandparents may never have dreamed of—problems like:

- Pressure to have sex.
- Drugs in schools and the community.
- Parents who are too busy or shy to talk with their children about the changes they are going through.
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS.
- Being orphaned because of AIDS or accidents.
- Wars and political instability.

To cope with all these things and to get through adolescence safely, you need to be strong, creative, resourceful and hopeful. Try to learn from the people around you who are strong and calm in the face of hard times. Take a page out of their book and try to cope with the challenges facing you with a positive attitude.

**ADOLESCENTS FEEL AS THOUGH NOTHING BAD WILL HAPPEN TO THEM**

It is a characteristic of adolescents in every country in the world—from Botswana to Brazil, from Kenya to Korea, from Ivory Coast to India—to think bad things cannot happen to them. “It won’t happen to me,” they tell themselves. They sometimes feel too confident and too safe.

Are you like this? Do you feel you can take risks and nothing bad will happen to you? For example, you and your girlfriend might know about contraceptives. But you think that as long as you don’t have sex very often, you and your girlfriend will be safe from an unwanted pregnancy.

Or you might know a lot about HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. You might know that it can be transmitted through unprotected sex, but you don’t think your boyfriend could possibly be infected. You don’t think HIV infection could happen to you or the kind of people you know.

Does this sound like you? If so, here are some things you should 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. This means that if you have
unprotected sex once a month, you (or your girlfriend) would probably be faced with an unwanted pregnancy within one year.

Keep in mind too that HIV infection does happen to adolescents. In fact, it happens to adolescents more than to anyone else! Adolescents are getting infected with HIV faster than any other age group in Africa: 60% of all new HIV infections are among young people.

Don’t let one of those pregnant adolescents or new HIV cases be you. Read this book carefully to find out how you can make good choices to stay safe and healthy. Please share this book with your friends so they too can learn how to make smart and healthy choices.

To go through adolescence safely, you need at least three things:

- The facts of life.
- Values—you need to know what you believe is right so that you can make decisions that you can live with.
- Life skills so you can use the facts you know and remain true to your values.

THE FACTS

What do we mean by “The Facts”? What are the “Facts of Life”?

The facts are all the essential pieces of information—the things you have to know in order to cope with everyday life and make good decisions.

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

Most importantly, knowing the facts means knowing the difference between reality and myths. It is very important to have the facts when you’re trying to look at your options, make important choices and decide what you should do.
You need facts to stay safe. This book is full of facts. It will give you 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—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 Cedi, Kwacha, Naira, Shillings, Dollars or any other currency to buy that object.

But the word value can also refer to the things you believe in and the things you think are important in life. Some good values are:

- honesty
- openness
- tolerance
- kindness
- charity
- forgiveness

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, being active in your community or being active in your church, mosque or temple.

Values help guide how you act, and they help shape the decisions you make. They help you make choices that are good for you and good for others. For example, someone who values kindness and tolerance would stand up for a disabled classmate or neighbour whom other people were treating unkindly. Someone who values honesty would 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. Knowing what you value will help you make smart and
healthy choices and stay safe while you go through all the normal ups and downs of adolescence. Knowing what you value will help you remain true to yourself even when someone is pressuring you to do something you think is wrong. When you're faced with several alternatives, knowing your own values will help you make the right choice—a choice you can live with.

**LIFE SKILLS**

You also need life skills to stay safe. In fact “life skills” can be life saving skills like being able to:

- **Talk out your feelings.** Your feelings are important, but other people may not understand how you feel unless you 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...” Practise using “I” statements until you feel comfortable saying them.

- **Argue your point.** You have good reasons for feeling the way you do, and it's important to learn how to communicate those reasons without putting down other people or making them feel bad—without being unkind, aggressive or overly critical.

- **Know what you think and stand by it no matter what other people say.** Everyone has beliefs about right and wrong, good and bad. These beliefs are called principles. Sometimes, you may know exactly what your principles are. But at other times, things aren't as clear, and you may have to spend some time carefully thinking through what is right for you and why. If you are clear about what you think is right—why you do or do not want to do something—you'll be able to stand up for what you believe in. And ultimately, standing up for your beliefs will earn you respect.

- **Make good decisions under pressure.** As you become an adult, you start having to make more decisions for yourself. Sometimes, other people may be urging you to do one thing, and you might feel tempted to just go along. But making good decisions means carefully weighing all your choices and thinking about the consequences of each one. It can be hard to do this if someone is rushing you or putting pressure on you to decide quickly. One important part of making good decisions is being clear about your principles and your overall goals in life. Another important part of decision-making is giving yourself the time you need. Remember, you can always tell someone: “I need to think about this. Let me get back to you.”
These life skills also have names like “assertiveness,” “creative thinking,” “problem solving,” “decision-making” and “self-awareness.” Life skills are very important. In fact, life skills are just as important as knowing the facts because the facts won’t protect you unless you have life skills too. For example, you may know that unprotected sex can lead to pregnancy, and STIs including HIV/AIDS, and you may have decided that you don’t want to have sex yet, but you don’t know how to be assertive with your boyfriend and argue your point.

You need life skills to use the facts you know—to stand up for what you want and what you believe in, especially when people you care about, and whose respect you want, think differently.

How are your life skills? Can you stand up for what you believe is right even if your friends think otherwise? Are you strong enough to argue for your health or even for your life? Start practising as you read this book!
Between the ages of 10 and 16 years of age, most girls and boys enter puberty. Puberty is the time when you change physically, emotionally and mentally from a child into a young adult.

THE GROWTH SPURT: THE START OF PUBERTY

Up to the age of 9 or 10, there is little difference between boys and girls. They have different sexual organs, but they both have flat chests and similarly sized muscles.

The big physical differences between girls and boys start becoming obvious during puberty. 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 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.

But remember: these ages are only average ages. Some adolescents start their growth spurt earlier and others start later. Starting early or starting late doesn't have much effect on how tall you will be or how fast you will grow. Some early starters grow quickly, while others grow slowly. The same is true of late starters: some grow quickly, others slowly.

During the period of fast growth, boys and girls often feel awkward and clumsy. This is because different parts of the body grow at different times and at different rates. The first parts of the body to grow are usually the hands and feet, followed by the arms, legs, hips and chest. Adolescents who suddenly grow very fast often find themselves tripping and falling. It feels 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. Sometimes when this happens, they develop “stretch marks,” light or darkish lines on their skin. These marks may fade or get less noticeable as a person gets older, but they may never disappear completely.

Even if it seems like you are growing very fast, puberty is actually a gradual process. It will take some time before you are physically and emotionally an adult. In the meantime, here are some things to keep in mind:

**EVERYBODY IS DIFFERENT**

Each person enters puberty at a different time and with a different speed. Your breasts may be slower to grow than those of your friend, but you start to menstruate earlier. Or you may experience everything much later. She gets breasts and starts to menstruate when she’s 12. You get breasts and start to menstruate at 15.

Or, 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 big muscles already, whereas you have not grown a centimetre!

Remember, everyone is different, and whenever these changes happen to you is the right time for you.

**EVERYBODY IS SPECIAL**

In terms of your health, it does not matter if you are developing faster or more slowly than your peers. Your body will change when it is ready, and there is nothing you can do about the timing. Some girls and boys who are perfectly healthy do not develop until much later than their peers. Other girls and boys develop much earlier than their peers, and they are perfectly normal and healthy too.

But, of course, it can be very hard to be different. It can be hard to be the first girl in the class with breasts or the last boy to have his voice change. You may be teased. You may feel very different than your peers.
Sherifan, 15, Ghana

“I began noticing changes in my body when I was eleven years old. I started developing breasts, having hairs in my armpits and genitals. I felt very bad because I had these changes very early, and I felt very different from my peers.”

Sherry, 19, Ghana

“I was in class 6. I don’t know if my friends were developing late or I was developing early, but I felt bad when I began to develop breasts. I had heard my mom talk about how, during their days they used a tapoli (small wooden tool for crushing pepper) to try to break down the lump in the breast, so I tried it—maybe about three times. It was quite a funny idea, and of course it didn’t work at all. But now, those who were teasing me have much bigger breasts than I do.”

Try to remember that these things will not matter in the long run. By the time you are 20, it will not make any difference to you—or to anyone else—whether your voice started to change when you were 13 or 17. It will not matter if your periods started when you were 11 or when you were 16.

Sherry, 19, Ghana

“Just let nature take its course. Even if you don’t like it, there’s nothing you can do about it. Just accept who you are.”

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

1. You can make sure that you are a nice person. You can make sure that you work hard at whatever you do (in school, at work and around the house). You can work on your personality, your sense of humour and your character. Focus on who you are and who you want to be—not what you look like.

2. Try your best to ignore the teasing. Try to laugh it off, and don’t let the teasers see that they are upsetting you. Eventually, they will get tired of teasing you.

3. Never let your desires for your peers' approval and respect lead you into doing things that are not good for you. Don’t let your need to fit in with your peers push you into doing things that you know are not right—like teasing other people, taking drugs or taking risks that may hurt you or your future.

4. Educate yourself with correct information. Make sure you know where to go to get the information you need and the answers to your questions as you go through adolescence.
Also, keep this in mind: people of your age often know more myths (false information) than they do facts—especially when it comes to explaining puberty and sex. Your friends may tell you things that are not true, so you need to know where to go to get the facts. For example, you may be told that your breasts or penis will grow if you have sex. Or you may be teased that your breasts are big because you are having sex already. Similarly, you might hear that pimples are a sign that you should have sex.

But none of these things are true! They are all myths. Myths like these can be dangerous, mostly because they add to your worries. They make you think you can do things to change something that you just cannot control.

HORMONES

What controls these changes in your body? What makes you develop faster or slower? What makes you develop at all?

Your body constantly produces hormones, which are like special chemical messengers that tell your body how and when to change and to grow. Your growth spurt is caused by a growth hormone, which is released by the brain in increasing amounts.

In addition to the growth hormone, sex hormones also start to be released during puberty. For girls, the sex hormones are produced in the ovaries, and for boys, they are 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 grow, and the hips usually grow more quickly than their shoulders. Girls’ hips become wider and rounder, and their waists seem smaller and narrower in comparison. The breasts also begin growing.

For boys, these sex hormones cause their shoulders to broaden and their arms and legs to become thicker and more muscular. Boys’ breasts do not change as dramatically as girls’ breasts do at puberty, but they do change. Some boys experience some swelling of their breasts during puberty, but this usually goes away with time.

Hormones also affect your emotions. Many adolescents feel very intense emotions. One minute they may feel happy and excited, but the next minute, they feel like crying. They may feel great about themselves one day and bad the next.
These changes in your emotions are called “mood swings,” and most adolescents experience them from time to time. During puberty, the production of hormones suddenly increases, which is what makes many adolescents feel a wide range of strong emotions. Later in life the production of hormones will decrease again, and you will feel more in control of your emotions.

Keep in mind that all the physical, emotional and mental changes of puberty are caused by the hormones your own body is producing. There’s nothing you can do to speed up or to slow down the production of these hormones. Just try to remember that you are unique, and you are also perfectly normal.

YOUR GENITALS OR “PRIVATE PARTS”

In addition to causing changes in girls’ and boys’ body shapes and emotions, hormones make the genitals grow. Genitals is the scientific word for private parts—those areas of your body that you keep covered with your underwear or knickers.

Before you became an adolescent, your genitals were mostly just the place from where you relieved yourself. During adolescence, however, the genitals get bigger. For girls, skin and tissue in the genitals becomes softer and fatty. For boys, the penis starts to lengthen and thicken during puberty. The testicles also grow, and they start to make sperm, which are the male’s reproductive cells.

The genitals also start producing new fluids during puberty. Boys start producing semen, a mucus-like fluid in which sperm swim. Semen comes out of the penis when a boy ejaculates. Girls also produce fluids—menstrual blood and vaginal fluid (read Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 for more on boys and girls).

BODY HAIR AND SKIN CHANGES

Your skin and body hair change during puberty as well. For most adolescents, their skin becomes more oily. The simple skin of childhood is gone. This can lead to pimples, which are common problems for adolescents (read Chapter 5 for information on good care of your skin).

Another sign of puberty is hair in new places on the body. Both boys and girls may notice the growth of a little more hair on their legs and arms. In addition, boys grow hair on their private parts, face, chest, and in their armpits. Girls also grow hair on their private parts and in their armpits.

The hair in the private parts is called pubic hair. Some people have lots of pubic hair. Others only have a little. Pubic hair helps to keep the genital area clean, which is very important because the skin in the genital area is delicate and easily irritated. The pubic hair helps to hold sweat and other secretions away from the sensitive skin in the genitals.
Some adolescents are not very happy about their new body hair—especially pubic hair—at first.

**Balay, 16, Kenya**
“I was shocked! I did not know that one could grow hair in the pubic area. I thought I was sick and asked my mum who assured me that it is normal.”

**Diana, 17, Zambia**
“When it grew, I just told myself that I had to live with it.”

**Douglas, 12, Zimbabwe**
“Growing pubic hair was not pleasant. It made me look ugly.”

Some adolescents are teased about their pubic hair or lack of it.

**Bernard, 17, Kenya**
“My friends laughed at me because I had not grown pubic hair.”

Just remember, pubic hair is natural and has a job to do. So whether you have a little or a lot, don’t worry too much about it.

Hair in your armpits also comes during puberty, although often it is in late puberty. Many girls do not grow underarm hair until after their breasts have started growing and after their menstrual periods have started. For boys, underarm hair usually starts appearing about a year or so after the pubic hair has started growing. Like pubic hair, underarm hair has a job. During puberty, you start to sweat more, and the hair helps to keep the sweat away from your skin.

For boys, facial hair is usually the last new body hair to appear. Hair starts growing on the corners of a boy’s upper lips. Sideburns may start to grow at the same time. The hair above the upper lip (moustache) continues to grow, and then hair grows on the upper part of the cheek and just below the middle of the lower lip. Finally, it grows on the chin. Hair doesn’t usually start growing on the chin until a boy’s genitals are fully developed. For most boys, facial hair starts growing between the ages of 14 and 18, but it may start earlier or later.

**YOUR MIND**

While there are many obvious changes to the body during puberty, the mind (brain) is also changing in less visible ways.

During adolescence, the mental abilities increase a great deal, along with the capacity for critical and independent thinking. As a result of these changes, you start developing your own identity. You begin seeing yourself as a unique individual. You want to think for yourself and make your own decisions. Often, for the first time, you see things differently than your parents.
do. You may feel like questioning your parents’ beliefs and reasons. You may want to experience life first-hand, rather than simply rely on what others tell you. You may want to try new things for yourself, and, at times, to take risks.

All these mental changes are exciting signs that you are becoming an adult. But they don’t mean that you are already an adult. Even though your mental abilities are increasing a great deal, there’s still plenty that you don’t know. In fact, you will never know everything, so it’s important to know where or whom to go to for the information you need. There will be times when it’s worth drawing on the experience and knowledge of an older person. So, ask questions. Don’t assume you have all the answers. Learn everything you can.
Chapter 2
Your Changing Body

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

What should you expect as you change from a girl to a woman or a boy to a man?

• The growth spurt: your hands, feet, arms, legs, hips and chest will become larger. Your body will produce hormones, which are special chemical messengers that tell the body how to grow and change.

• Your genitals, or private parts, will get bigger and begin producing fluids.

• Your skin may become more oily.

• 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.

• 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 be patient and don't worry too much.
Boys

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.

**BODY SHAPE AND SIZE**

Most boys start their “growth spurt” between the ages of 12 and 13 years. Of course some boys start a bit earlier, and some boys start later. During the growth spurt, your body will start getting much taller and bigger.

One of the first parts of your body to grow may be your feet. In fact, the bones in your feet often grow much faster than the other parts of the body, so your feet may reach full size long before the rest of you does. 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 the rest of your body time to catch up!

Some bones in your body will grow more than others, and this causes your body shape to change. For example, your shoulders will 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 as these muscles develop, you will get stronger. Your chest will also get bigger as muscles and some fat accumulate there. Many boys also notice that their nipples and breasts change during puberty. The nipples may get a little bit bigger and the rings around the nipples may get larger and darker in colour.

Some boys find that their breasts swell and are painful. A few boys have a lot of swelling, which makes them very worried that they are going to grow big breasts—like a woman. Don’t worry. This is perfectly normal. The swelling and tenderness are caused by all the hormones in your body. It may take a year or even a year and a half, but the swelling will go down when your body stops producing so many hormones.
Through all these changes, be patient with yourself! Your body is just fine, and you are perfectly normal. Even if you are not growing as fast as your friends, don’t worry. You will grow! It is just a matter of time. When you start growing 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 sure sign that you are going through puberty. The voice starts changing after your growth spurt has begun—usually around the age of 14 or 15.

Boys' voices become lower and deeper during puberty because 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.

Precious, 15-year-old boy, Ghana
“The first thing I noticed was the breaking of my voice, broad chest and shoulders. I was happy about it because I saw that now I am an adolescent.”

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

Aloysious, 19, Uganda
“When my voice changed at 15, I realised that I was experiencing growth in my life. I grew very rapidly and was so happy.”

The first sign that your voice is changing is often a sudden squeak or cracking of the voice when you are talking. Some boys find it embarrassing when their voice cracks, especially because it is so unpredictable. Their voice will be normal one minute, but the next minute it is high and squeaky. Other boys do not notice very much when their voice begins changing. Even if your voice cracks a lot, don’t let it worry you. Like other changes during puberty, it is perfectly normal.
YOUR PRIVATE PARTS

The penis is made of muscles that surround a narrow tube, called the urethra. Urine and semen pass through the urethra. The penis has a body and head. The “body” or “shaft” is the tube-like part of the penis. The “head” is the tip of the penis. It is called the glans. It is the most sensitive and delicate part of the penis.

When you are born, the head of the penis is covered by a small, thin fold of skin. This skin is called the foreskin. In many parts of Africa, this skin is removed in an operation called circumcision (see page 20 for more on circumcision).

The size of the penis varies from male to male. It has no relation to body size. In most cases, the larger a penis is when soft, the less it increases in size when it is erect. If it is small when soft, it may increase relatively more in size when it becomes erect.

A lot of adolescent boys (and even some grown men) spend a lot of time thinking—and worrying—about their penis. Is it too small? Why does it curve that way? Is there something wrong with it?

Aloysious, 19, Uganda

“At certain times we would pull out our penises and compare who had the biggest.”

If you have ever wondered whether your penis is the right size, just remember that sexual performance does not depend on penis size. The size of the penis actually has little effect on a woman’s enjoyment of sexual intercourse. In fact, for most women and men, enjoyment of sex is mostly determined by their feelings about each other. It’s the relationship that counts—not the size 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 from puberty to old age. The skin of the scrotum is a bit hairy and oily. It tends to collect dirt, which may start to smell bad if it is not washed regularly.

During childhood, your scrotum is drawn up close to your body. But, as you go through puberty, the scrotum begins to get looser and to hang down, although when you are cold or frightened or feeling sexual, your scrotum may again get tighter and draw up close to your body. The scrotum hangs down because the testicles need to be kept at a temperature lower than your body temperature in order to make sperm.
DO YOU KNOW about circumcision?

Circumcision is an operation where the fold of skin around the top of the penis is cut. This fold of skin is called the foreskin. It covers the glans of the penis, but it can be pulled down the shaft.

According to some African cultures, as well as some religions, such as Islam and Judaism, circumcision is usually done when babies are just a few days old. In other African cultures, circumcision is done when a boy is an adolescent, and the procedure is considered a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. There are also cultures in Africa that do not traditionally practise circumcision at all.

There's nothing wrong with being circumcised, and there is nothing wrong with not being circumcised. Circumcision is a cultural and religious rite, and if the people from your home don't do it, that is just fine.

Does circumcision make a difference to sexual feeling? This is very hard to know since each male experiences sex in his own way. What is sure is that both circumcised and uncircumcised males can enjoy sex and can make their partners happy.

While circumcision is mainly a religious and cultural practice, some people believe that circumcision has some health benefits—mainly because circumcision makes it easier to keep the penis clean. But there can be other health reasons for circumcision too. On some boys and men, the foreskin is too tight or attached to the head of the penis and cannot be fully rolled down the shaft. This can cause swelling and pain, and circumcision is often the best solution. Some people think that circumcision protects against HIV/AIDS and other STIs, but even if you have been circumcised, you are at risk of HIV/AIDS and STIs. You should always practise safer sex.

So what does all this mean for you? If your culture doesn't circumcise boys, 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 the foreskin carefully. That's usually all you need to do. However, boys who cannot roll back the foreskin and who feel pain when they get an erection should talk to a health worker.

Increasingly, circumcision is being done in health facilities, but in some places it is done by traditional “surgeons” as part of a traditional ceremony. Wherever it is done, a clean, sterilised instrument should be used each and every time a circumcision is performed. It is very dangerous if the same knife is used on many boys because if any one of the boys is infected with HIV, the knife can spread the infection to the other boys.

If you undergo a traditional circumcision ceremony, make sure it has been modernised to prevent the spread of HIV and other blood-borne illnesses. Never bow to cultural traditions that expose you to HIV. They can be changed to be safe. For example, in Mbale, Uganda, people took the following steps to make sure that circumcision is safe:

- each circumcision candidate is instructed to have his own knife.
- the knife must be boiled before use.
- the surgeons must wash their hands carefully between each candidate.
DID YOU KNOW that there are many 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. Your penis doesn't need exercise. It will work just fine without any sex at all. Sexual abstinence or “waiting” can never 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 satisfy a woman.* **False!** The size of the penis has little effect on women's enjoyment of sexual intercourse. This is because the main centre of sexual sensation for a woman is the clitoris and the area around the opening of the vagina. The vagina itself does not have many nerves so it doesn't feel very much.

4. *Boys with small penises cannot use condoms.* **Not true!** Condoms are made to fit tightly, so everyone can use them.

5. *You need to have sex whenever you get an erection.* **False!** This is definitely not true, which is a good thing for you. Otherwise, what would you do if you got an erection in class? If you don't have sex, the erection will just go down on its own. You can't possibly injure yourself by not having sex when you get an 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 your penis size and any other part of your body. 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 too much sperm to build up and cause problems. In addition, sperm cannot move around to different parts of your body.

8. *Wet dreams are a sign that you need to have sex.* **False!** Wet dreams are just one way that your body gets rid of sperm and semen. It is not a sign that you need to have sex. Your body can regulate itself just fine without your having to take any risks.

PRACTISING GOOD HYGIENE

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

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. Smegma helps the foreskin slide back smoothly over the glans. However, if smegma accumulates beneath the foreskin, it can cause bad smells or an infection. It is very important to keep the under-the-foreskin area very clean at all times.
ERECTIONS

Normally the penis is soft and hangs down. During an erection, more blood flows into the penis than usual and less blood flows out. This makes the penis become larger and harder, and it stands out from the body. An erect penis usually curves upwards slightly, and it may curve to one side.

When your penis is erect, you will find that you can not 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 the penis is touched or caressed, or 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. While you are asleep at night, your penis will probably become erect and then go down about 5 to 7 times. This is completely normal and healthy.

Erections occur in males of all ages, including babies and old men. Sometimes boys worry that they are having too many erections. They are disturbed by very frequent erections in class, on the bus or when they are walking. Sometimes there seems to be an obvious reason for the erection. Maybe you are sitting next to someone you find attractive. At other times, however, erections may come for no reason at all.

Nfune, 13, from Zambia

"Erections are rather uncontrollable and frequent. Sometimes they show that you are sexually excited. I hate it when it occurs in school and in public!"

Please do not worry. You are merely normal, healthy and full of hormones. It can be embarrassing if you get an erection in class or in public place, but most of the time you are probably the only person who is aware of it.

Sometimes boys think that they must have sex to control these erections. This is not true! It is only a myth that some boys pass around as an excuse for having sex. Having erections is not a sign that you need to have sex.
EJACULATION

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

The mucus-like fluid comes out of the penis when a man ejaculates or “comes.” Ejaculation is the climax of sexual excitement, when a man has an erection. Keep in mind that you don't have to ejaculate every time you have an erection. If you just wait, the erection will go down on its own without causing any harm to you.

The mucus-like fluid is made up of two things. About 10% of the fluid are 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.

![A sperm](image)

The other 90% of ejaculate is a milky liquid called semen or seminal fluid. Semen allows the sperm to swim, and it provides nourishment for the sperm and keeps them alive. But semen is not food for girls! That's just another myth!

The sperm are made in the testicles (see illustration, page 19). semen—the white milky fluid—is made in the seminal vesicles. These are two glands behind the bladder. When a man ejaculates, sperm mix with semen from the seminal vesicles, and this fluid passes through tubes called the vas deferens, into the urethra, and comes 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, in fact, it is only about a teaspoonful. Do not under-estimate the power of this teaspoonful of semen, however. It contains about 500 million sperm! Each one of those sperm could make a girl pregnant. When you think about the 500 million sperm in one ejaculation, you will see how easy it is to make a girl pregnant.

If the boy or man is infected with HIV, one teaspoon of semen will probably also contain hundreds of thousands of the virus that causes AIDS.
Many boys worry that a condom will not be able to hold all these 500 million sperm. But those sperm are very, very small, and therefore, a condom can hold them all—provided it is put on correctly (see Chapter 10 for more on condoms).

Some boys worry that if they ejaculate too often, they will reduce the amount of semen in their body. They worry that they may run out of semen and won’t have enough when they need it. This can never happen. A man will make sperm and semen from the start of puberty until his dying day.

Also, remember that there is no way that too much sperm and semen can accumulate or build pressure in your body. Your body is a perfectly-tuned machine. Your body has ways to get rid of excess sperm and semen: one of them is wet dreams.

**WET DREAMS**

Boys sometimes release semen or “ejaculate” while they are asleep. This is called a wet dream. For many boys, the first wet dream is the first time semen comes out of their body. They will probably wake up and find a damp patch in the bed or on their clothes.

If you do not know about wet dreams, this can be confusing and worrisome. You might think that you have wet your bed or that you are bleeding or sick. But you will see that the fluid is milky white, not like blood or urine.

Wet dreams only happen when you are asleep. If you nap during the day, you could possibly have a wet dream, but most boys have wet dreams at night when they are asleep. Many boys who wake up to find that they have ejaculated recall that they were dreaming about something sexual. But you can have a wet dream even if you have not been having a sexy dream.

Most boys find wet dreams embarrassing. It’s okay to feel embarrassed, but remember that wet dreams are very common during adolescence. Not every adolescent boy has wet dreams, but most do.

A boy cannot stop himself from having wet dreams. They are natural and normal. They are the way that your body makes room for new sperm from the testicles. Having wet dreams does not mean that you should have sex.
Adam, 13, Uganda

“I don't think having wet dreams means I should be having sex. It is just growth. I only feel shy because I have to change my bed sheets every other day.”

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

Panaito from Kenya

“When I got my first wet dream, I felt that I had attained sexual maturity. I was happy to be among those who had already experienced it. But if I had not been informed, I would have even tried to see a doctor. Thank God I knew what it was.”

Adam, 13 of Uganda

“When I had my first wet dream, I told my big brother who assured me that it is part of growth.”

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

Nfune, 13, from Zambia

“I find them disgusting.”

Some boys have unkind “friends” who tease them about their wet dreams. But it is wrong to tease or laugh at someone because they have wet dreams. Wet dreams are normal.

Bernard, 17, of Nairobi, Kenya

“I was in Standard 8. I had not expected to start ejaculating so early. I confided in my friend. Instead of explaining why it had happened, he laughed at me. I felt embarrassed. I did not want anybody to know, but he told others, and some of them said that I was masturbating. I went to another friend who was older and he told me wet dreams were normal.”

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. In addition, being well informed will enable you to help younger boys understand what is happening to them as they go through adolescence.

There is plenty more good information in this book for you boys, so don’t stop reading here.
Chapter 3
Boys

During puberty, a boy can expect many changes to occur in his body. These changes are gradual and occur at different ages for different boys. Here are some of the changes you can expect:

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

As you undergo these changes, there are a few things to keep in mind:

- Every penis is the right size.
- There is nothing wrong with being circumcised, and there is nothing wrong with not being circumcised.
- Wash and clean your penis every day, always rolling back and washing under the foreskin if you are not circumcised.
- You do not need to have sex when you have an erection.
- Wet dreams are normal, common and nothing to worry about! They are not a sign that you should have sex.

Whenever these changes occur in your body is the right time. You are unique, and you are completely normal!
Chapter 2 gave some information about the changes that girls experience during puberty. This chapter will give you more information, so keep reading.

**BODY SHAPE AND SIZE**

Most girls start growing quickly around the ages of 10 to 11 years old—but there are always girls who start growing when they are younger or older than this. The feet are often the first part of the body to grow a lot. You may still be quite short, but find that your feet are suddenly very big! Don't worry, the rest of your body will catch up to those big feet. Your body is just growing at its own rate.

Other bones will also start growing—each at their own speed. Your arms and legs may start growing quickly while your backbone grows more slowly.

Another change you may notice is that your hips start growing. The hipbones become larger, and soft, fatty tissue grows on the hips, thighs and buttocks. As your hips become wider, your waist will look narrow in comparison, and your body will have a rounder, more womanly shape.

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_Catheryn, 15, Ghana_

“I was 10 years old when I first began to see changes in my body. People told me without these changes I wouldn’t be a woman so I was very happy. I was entering into womanhood and had to take proper care of myself.”

**YOUR BREASTS**

Some girls begin to develop breasts at age 8 or 9, but other girls do not start until much later. The development of the breasts is caused by a hormone called oestrogen. Oestrogen causes the tissues in the breasts to grow so that some day, when you have a baby, you will be able to produce and store milk.

Before your breasts start to form, your nipples will probably get larger and stand out more than they used to. Another change you may notice is that the ring of skin around the nipple—
the areola—gets darker in colour and larger. You also may see tiny lumps in the areola. These lumps are little glands, which are normal. When a woman has a baby, these glands produce a substance that helps protect the nipple when the baby is breast-feeding.

Magreth, 18, Tanzania
“When my breasts started to grow, I felt OK. Though sometimes it was a bit painful.”

As the nipples and areola get larger and darker, the breasts grow larger and fuller. As these changes start happening, you may notice that your breasts feel sore. It can be painful if they are bumped or hit. This is normal, and it is no cause for alarm. The breast is a very sensitive part of the body. The nipple is especially sensitive. When it is stimulated by different sensations, such as touches or even the cold, the nipple becomes harder and erect.

Some girls’ breasts grow slowly. For others the growth is very quick. On average, it takes about 4 years for the breasts to develop fully, but some girls’ breasts develop fully in less than a year, while other girls’ breasts can take as long as 6 years to develop. So if your breasts are taking a long time to develop, be patient. It will happen.

Deborah, 15, Uganda
“I developed breasts recently, but I’m worried at the rate they are enlarging. I don’t mind having breasts, but I hope they do not grow extraordinarily big. At first I was wondering why they had delayed to come, but now I’m scared about the size.”

Breasts come in all shapes and sizes. The size and shape of your breasts are determined by the genetic traits that you inherit from your parents. The size is also determined by the amount of fatty tissue in the breasts. There is nothing you can do about what your breasts look like. No amount of exercise can increase your breast size. Exercise works by building up muscles, and there are no muscles in the breasts. Just remember: all breast sizes—big and small—are good for feeding babies.

You also should know that breasts grow unevenly. 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 very noticeable. The shape of the nipple also varies a lot. Some women’s nipples turn inwards. Instead of pointing out, they sink into the areola.

Whether your breasts are large or small, they are the right size for you.
Breasts have different meanings in different cultures. 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, however, growing breasts is a big event in a girl’s life. It is a sign of growing up. Most girls come to like their breasts.

Prossy, 13, Uganda
“I like my breasts. I used to admire my elder sisters who already had breasts. I used to fold my stockings and put them inside my dress.”

Barlay, 16, Kenya
“I used to admire girls in bodysuits. I was happy when they came, so I could also wear a bodysuit.”

Cathy, 17, Uganda
“I developed breasts in Standard 1. I felt like I was the oldest girl in the class. It took me time to accept the changes that were happening to my body. But I liked the rounding of my hips. My friends kept on telling me that they were so tempting and this made me so proud.”

Sherifan, 15, Ghana
“I was very happy because I started to look like my mum. When I was not having breasts, I used to wear my mother’s bra and put my socks in them to look like my mum.”

Some girls feel embarrassed when their breasts begin to grow. This is normal too. Many girls who are embarrassed about their breasts feel that way because none of their friends have begun to develop breasts yet.

Irene, 16, Uganda
“When my breasts started growing, I used to wear very tight T-shirts, my little sister’s T-shirts. I wanted to flatten myself.”

Angela, 17, Kenya
“I was conscious and always wore a baggy sweater when they started appearing. I used to feel uneasy as I was in a mixed school and didn’t know what the boys would say.”

Some girls lose their upright posture and sink in their chests, because they feel embarrassed about their growing breasts. This is a pity because everyone should like their body, and they shouldn’t care what other people say. Whether your breasts are big or small, pointed or round, they are nice the way they are.
Rita, 16, Uganda

“I like my breasts because they make me feel like a real woman. Big girls without breasts are always teased that they aren’t different from men.”

It would be great if people did not tease others about their breasts. People who tease are just immature. Try your best to ignore them.

### DID YOU KNOW that there are many myths about breasts?

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

1. **Girls with pointed breasts are sexy. This is false!** Sexiness is in your mind, not in a piece of your anatomy.

2. **Putting butter on the nipples or letting insects bite the nipples, makes the breasts grow faster. Not true!** It is hormones that make the breasts grow—nothing else will make any difference.

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 the breasts is genetically determined. Nothing you do will make them bigger or smaller.

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

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

7. **Girls with big breasts will have a lot of milk for their babies. False!** Milk production does not depend on breast size. Even the smallest breasts can produce enough milk to satisfy a baby.

### TAKING CARE OF YOUR BREASTS

Breasts are very sensitive, so there are a few things you should know about taking care of them. You should never pluck the hairs around your nipples, as this can cause an infection. It is normal to have these hairs. A few girls have a little discharge coming from the nipples. This is normal, but if the discharge seems to have blood in it or is brownish in colour, you should see a doctor because this could be an infection.
Taking care of your breasts also includes making sure no one touches them against your will. Boys and men usually find women's breasts very attractive. But no one should touch you unless you want them to.

For some people, the breasts are very sensitive to touch. Touching can be sexually exciting, and this might lead you to go farther than you really want to go.

**BRAS**

If you have small breasts or very firm ones, you may not need a bra. But if your breasts are large, you may feel more comfortable wearing a bra that provides some support so the breasts don't move or bounce when you walk, run, dance or play. Some adolescent girls feel embarrassed about their breasts, so wearing a bra makes them feel less self-conscious.

Many women figure out their bra size simply by trying on different sizes to see which one is most comfortable. This works just fine. Other people take measurements to figure out the right bra size. To take your measurements, you need to know your chest size and your cup size. Measure around your chest, just under your breast, to get the chest size. Then measure around the fullest part of your breasts to get your cup size. If the chest and cup measurements are the same you need cup A. If your breast measurement is 2.5 cm more than your chest size, you need cup B. And if your breast measurement is 5 cm more than your chest measurement, you need cup C.

**YOUR PRIVATE PARTS**

The vagina is the biggest of the three holes in the genital area. The other holes are the urethra (in front of the vagina) and the anus (in back of the vagina). The vagina itself is a short tube about 7 cm deep and 3 - 4 cm wide. It is made up of soft folds of skin.

The adult vagina is very strong, extremely stretchy and very muscular. During childbirth, the vagina has to stretch to many times its normal size to allow a baby to leave the mother's body. But a young girl's vagina is thin and cannot stretch very much. This is one reason why childbirth is so dangerous for adolescent girls. The vagina of an adolescent girl can tear or burst during childbirth. This causes very serious problems (read Chapter 11).

At puberty, the walls of the vagina begin to produce a fluid or discharge. This fluid is thicker and stickier than saliva, and it has a purpose: to keep the vagina clean and to maintain the proper environment in which “good” bacteria that prevent infections can grow. Many women notice more vaginal discharge at different times of the month and when they are feeling sexually excited. This is normal.
DO YOU KNOW the facts about the vagina?

There are many myths about the vagina:

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 make them smell.

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

3. *It is obscene to touch the vagina.* **Not true!** The vagina is just like any other part of your body. Touching it is just like touching your ear. But your vagina is a very private part, so you should only touch it when you are all alone.

4. *The vagina is only for the pleasure of men.* **False!** The vagina is part of a woman's body. It is hers and hers alone! Don't let anyone touch it if it makes you feel uncomfortable.

The area around the opening of the vagina is called the *vulva*. The opening of the vagina is normally closed, and it is protected by the *labia majora* and the *labia minora*, which are the outer and inner “lips.” These lips are two folds of skin. There are many small glands in the labia, so you may notice that you perspire and have some white secretions here.

In front of the urethra, where the inner lips (the labia minora) join, is the *clitoris*. The clitoris is a small bump of flesh about the size of a small pea. The clitoris is filled with nerve endings, and it is the most sensitive part of the genitals. It is very sensitive to touch.

Deep inside you, at the end of the vagina is the *cervix*. The cervix closes the end of the vagina. There is only a very small opening in the cervix, and this opening leads to the uterus (womb). The opening is so narrow that only menstrual blood can come down and only sperm cells can swim up. Some people fear that during sexual intercourse a condom could come off the penis and go up into the uterus. This is impossible because the opening of the cervix is much too small. The cervix only opens 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 get damaged or infected by bacteria and viruses that may enter the body during sexual intercourse. This could lead to cancer of the cervix. Girls who have sex early, or who have many sexual partners, or who have HIV, are more at risk for cancer of the cervix than girls who have a more careful sex life. Delaying sex and using condoms can protect your cervix (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 other family members or your friends as these can pass on infections from one person to another. After bathing, 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. If you cannot find cotton panties, wear ones that have a cotton lining.

After you pass urine or defaecate, you should always clean yourself by cleaning from the front of your private parts backwards towards the anus. Whether you use toilet tissue, paper, water, grass or leaves to clean yourself, make sure you avoid wiping forwards. If you wipe forwards, you risk pulling germs from the anus to the vagina and urethra. This can give you an infection.

You should never try to wash inside the vagina unless a doctor instructs you to do so. Unfortunately some girls and women try to wash inside the vagina with harsh soaps. Some women also 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 the normal fluids inside the vagina and can irritate the skin inside the vagina.

In some countries, like Zimbabwe and Zambia, women put herbs, pieces of cloth and other objects into the vagina to “clean” it or to tighten it. This is not a healthy practice because the skin inside the vagina is very delicate. Inserting foreign objects can cause small cuts, abrasions, and sores, which could become infected and could also put you at greater risk of HIV infection.

In general, it is best to never place anything in your vagina, except tampons and medicines prescribed by a doctor. Just make sure that you follow instructions closely.

It’s good to pay close attention to your normal discharge and how it changes during your monthly cycle so that you can recognise any unusual signs or 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. A female’s vaginal fluids also change when she is sexually aroused.

If the discharge becomes heavier or thicker, changes colour to yellow, green or brown, or causes itching in the private parts, then you may have an infection. Bad-smelling discharge, and pain or bleeding in the vagina when you are not in your menstrual period, are also signs of infection. If you experience any of these changes, you will need to see a doctor.

If you don’t engage in unprotected sex and if you practise good hygiene, you are unlikely to experience these problems. 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 or clean water and bath soap. Separate the outer lips to clean away secretions that collect there.
In some cultures, the clitoris and/or other parts of the female genitalia are cut or removed altogether through a practice called **female circumcision** or **genital cutting**. The operation varies in different countries. It ranges from cuts around the clitoris to the removal of the clitoris and the labia (the inner and outer lips). Cutting away the clitoris and the labia and stitching/narrowing the vagina opening is called infibulation and is the most extreme form of this practice.

**When is it carried out?** The age at which female circumcision is carried out varies from country to country. It is done during infancy, childhood, adolescence, at marriage or during a woman's first pregnancy.

**Why is it done?** Various cultural and traditional customs and beliefs support female circumcision, but neither the Bible nor the Koran support the practice. In some societies people believe that circumcision will preserve girls' virginity and prevent women from being loose (promiscuous). In addition, some people believe that female circumcision increases the sexual pleasure of husbands, and the practice is believed to increase girls' chances for marriage and to enhance their fertility.

**How it is done?** The procedure is usually done by older women or by traditional birth attendants who use special knives, scissors, pieces of glass, razor blades or crude tools to perform the operation. The operation is often performed in unclean conditions and poor light. Usually no painkillers (anaesthetics) or medicines to prevent infection (antiseptics) are used.

**What are the consequences?** Female circumcision can cause serious health and psychological (emotional) problems:

- **Severe bleeding (Haemorrhage)**: The cutting of the genitals can cause severe bleeding. This may result in death or in severe anaemia (weak blood).
- **Infection**: Infection can result from the use of unclean instruments or tools during the operation, and it can be caused by traditional medicines used for healing the wound. The infection may spread to the uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries causing constant pain and infertility. Infection can also cause death.
- **Shock**: Extreme weakness or loss of consciousness can result from severe bleeding, pain or infection.
- **Urine retention**: After being cut, females may hold their urine for hours or days because of pain or fear of passing urine on the wound. Even after the wound has healed, for an infibulated woman, the hole may be too small to pass urine.
- **Difficulties during menstruation**: If the opening of the vagina is too small for menstrual blood to flow out properly, the blood may collect in the vagina and uterus. This can result in infection and in the uterus becoming swollen with menstrual blood.
DO YOU KNOW about female circumcision? (continued)

- **Difficulties during sexual intercourse and childbirth.** Girls who have been circumcised may find sex painful. They also may have problems during childbirth if the opening of vagina is too narrow for the baby to pass through (see Chapter 11).
- **Psychological and social effects:** Female circumcision may leave a lasting mark on the life and mind of the woman. She may lose trust and confidence in her parents or guardians. She also may suffer from feelings of incompleteness, anxiety, depression and the inability to enjoy sexual relations.

Because of the serious health risks involved and because female circumcision is not a medically necessary procedure, many people now call it **female genital mutilation** (FGM). It is considered a violation of women and girls’ rights to physical and mental health and their rights to liberty, security and bodily integrity (the wholeness or completeness of their body). If you or a girl you know is facing pressure to be circumcised, talk to a local authority or a health worker to see if they can talk to the parents and relatives about the serious health consequences of the procedure.

**MENSTRUATION AND THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE**

Most girls begin having menstrual periods (also called monthly periods) between the ages of 10 and 16. Menarche (the beginning of menstruation) is a sign that big changes have taken place deep inside a young woman’s body. It is also a sign that she could become pregnant if she has sexual intercourse with a male.

During puberty, hormones cause the **ovaries**, two egg-shaped organs, to mature and to start releasing an egg (or ovum) each month. Every female is born with thousands of eggs in her ovaries. The eggs are so small that you can not see them without a microscope.

As the ovaries mature, the **uterus** also matures, and a soft lining begins to form in the uterus each month. This is how the uterus prepares itself to receive a fertilised egg. If there is no fertilised egg, the lining of the uterus will break down and will 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. They don’t know 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 normal too.

Even when it is regular, the length of the menstrual cycle varies for different women and girls. 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 5 to 7 days her body will be shedding the lining from the walls of her uterus. At the same time, her body has seen that there is going to be no pregnancy that month, and it knows that it needs to start to prepare another egg. One egg starts ripening in one of her ovaries. Soon afterwards, the uterus starts to build up another lining.

Halfway through the cycle—sometime around Day 14 or 2 weeks after she started bleeding—the egg is released from the ovary, and it starts to float down the fallopian tube. This is the fertile period, when the woman’s chances of becoming pregnant are highest. The egg spends a few days inside the fallopian tube, and if it meets a male’s sperm there, it can become fertilised and the woman could become pregnant (see Chapter 11 for more on pregnancy).

If the egg doesn't become fertilised, it goes into the uterus, down through the cervix and vagina, and passes out of her body. This will be around Day 20.

About a week later, when her body realises that there has been no fertilised egg, the lining of the uterus will again 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 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.
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 become pregnant by mistake because they have sex during what they think should be their “safe days”—the days when they think that their risks of pregnancy are low.

Most girls and boys have heard of “safe days.” However, there are no “safe days” from pregnancy for adolescents. This is because the menstrual cycle is so irregular during adolescence. And even if your periods have been regular, they can suddenly become irregular.

In addition, there are no “safe days” against HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). You can get those infections every day of the month.

Waiting for the “safe days” is not a good way to prevent pregnancy or to protect yourself against STIs. If you are a sexually active adolescent, never count on “safe days” for protection. There are much better ways to protect yourself (read Chapters 10 and 11 for more on safer sex and contraception).

THE FIRST MENSTRUATION

Starting to menstruate is a very big event in a girl's life. Many girls can remember the exact day they started.

Ruvimbo, 13, Zimbabwe

“I remember it was on June 10. I woke up and found my clothes with blood. I went and told my mother. She gave me cotton and told me how to use it. She also explained to me that if there is no cotton I could use old material.”

Menstruation means that your body is developing and working in a new way. It also means you can become pregnant if you have sex. But menstruation does not mean that your body is ready for sex or for having a baby. The vagina is still small and immature until a young woman reaches the age of 18 to 20. In addition, the hips or pelvic bones may be too small for normal delivery.

Menstruation is a sign of health, but many girls are very shocked and unhappy when they first menstruate—usually because they did not know what it was, and they thought that something was wrong.
Diana, 17, Zambia
“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.”

Sherifan, 15, Ghana
“I didn’t know what it was. I was very upset and felt shy both with my parents and my peers. I even prayed and asked God to make that thing go away. I later realised it was part of life.”

Stabisile, 19, Zimbabwe
“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 and girls whose mothers and older sisters talk to them about menstruation often find it easier to accept this change. They feel better able to handle it.

Sandra, 13, Uganda
“I have not yet begun menstruation, but even if it comes I already know why it is there and I know how to manage it.”

Demitrida, 13, Tanzania
“I have not started my menstrual period yet. When I do I will tell my guardian teacher. I will also tell my mother so that she can help me with cotton or pieces of cloth.”

You will know that you have started to menstruate when a little blood comes out of your vagina. The blood does not pour like water from a tap. It dribbles slowly. Usually by the time you notice a feeling of unusual wetness, your panties have absorbed any blood that has come out, but the rest of your clothes will be fine.

But sometimes there is more blood, or it comes more suddenly. Or, it might take you a longer time to notice what is happening. Cathy, 17, from Uganda bled through her panties on to her clothes:

Cathy, 17, Uganda
“It happened in class with all my classmates around. I stood up to go to the toilet. Then I realised I had stained my dress. Oh, it was such a terrible experience. I was so embarrassed. My friends helped me, but I spent the whole week at home.”

If this happens to you, stay cool. It’s not your fault. You didn’t know it was going to start! It takes everyone a while to figure out how to deal with menstrual periods.
DO YOU KNOW the facts about menstruation?

Everyone has many questions about menstruation. Here are some common questions and the answers:

1. *How much blood will I lose each month?* Over the whole monthly menstrual period, the average female only loses about 60-70 ml of blood. Measure 70 ml in science class. You’ll see that it is not very much! However, this is just an average. Some females lose even less—just a few tablespoons worth of blood a month. 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. Adolescent girls tend to 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. Do not consider safe days a good way to protect yourself!


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

5. *Does sex cure menstrual cramps?* No, sexual intercourse will not cure menstrual cramps. This is just a myth that young people pass around.

KEEPING A CALENDAR

For most girls, it takes some time to get used to menstruation. If you are feeling unhappy about menstruation, your feelings are perfectly normal. Try to remember that menstruation is a sign of maturity and health. You should also know that it will not last forever. Most women stop having their periods when they are in their late 40s and their 50s. This is called menopause.

Many girls find it helpful to keep a diary of when they bleed each month. Even if they are irregular, this helps them have some idea of when they might menstruate so that they can prepare for it. 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 your cycle is and how regular (or irregular) it is.
Susan, aged 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 find a better way to protect yourself against pregnancy and against STIs, including HIV/AIDS (see Chapter 11).

DISCOMFORTS WITH PERIODS

Many girls have swelling and extra 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 will help you feel more comfortable, and eating less salty food will help reduce the amount of water that your body is storing.

Periods can affect one’s mood too. Before their period starts each month, some girls feel tearful or depressed. Sometimes girls feel bad tempered because their breasts feel sore or their body feels a bit swollen or bloated. This moodiness is sometimes called “premenstrual tension,” and it is a common problem. Try not to let it bother you too much.

Many girls experience a bit of abdominal pain or cramps during their period. These cramps happen because the muscles of the uterus are contracting while the lining is being shed. These cramps are normal and can be managed. If the pain is strong, lie down and try to completely relax your body by breathing in deeply and slowly. You can also gently massage the abdomen and back. Alternatively, a hot water bottle placed on the abdomen and lower stomach will give relief. If this does not work, try a painkiller from a pharmacy, kiosk 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 can get 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, by the time you are 18 or so, they probably won’t bother you as much. But some girls have extraordinarily painful periods. These girls usually are the same ones who have very heavy periods.

Girls with very heavy periods usually end up using many pads in one day and night and yet they still stain their sheets or clothes. They often miss school because they are bleeding too much or are in too much pain. Imagine missing school every month. Imagine the impact that has on your studies!
There is a solution for severe menstrual problems, so you should not suffer unnecessarily. If you have truly terrible period pains or bleed very heavily—and if you are missing school because of your periods—you should see a health worker. Some health workers will prescribe contraceptive pills to relieve heavy, painful periods. The pills make the menstrual periods more regular, and they also reduce the amount of blood lost each month. If you need to consult a health worker about your periods, ask about contraceptive pills. You can take these pills if you are a virgin and are not having sex. The pills contain very low doses of the hormones that naturally occur in your body. They are safe for adolescents.

If your doctor does not want to prescribe the pills for you, ask what else you can do to reduce the discomfort you are going through every month. You should not miss school 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 8 days.

**SEX AND MENSTRUATION**

There is absolutely no truth to the rumour that sex cures menstrual pains. In fact, sex during menstruation can increase the risks of getting STIs, including HIV. Menstrual blood is a rich environment in which bacteria and viruses can grow very quickly.

If a menstruating female has sex with a male who has an STI, she is more likely to get infected than during other times of her monthly cycle. In addition, she is likely to get a more serious infection when she is menstruating. This is because the opening of the cervix is wider than usual so that the menstrual blood can flow out. The STI germs can travel up into the uterus and fallopian tubes and can cause an infection high up in the female reproductive organs. This can result in infertility.

For the male, having sex with a menstruating female is also risky. If she is infected with HIV, her menstrual blood will be rich in HIV viruses.

**COMFORT, HEALTH AND HYGIENE**

In some cultures, menstruating females are seen as dirty—but actually menstrual blood is clean. Once menstrual blood leaves the body, however, bacteria can grow in it, causing it to smell, which is why good hygiene is especially important during menstruation. During menstruation, wash yourself at least once a day to keep clean. Do not use deodorants or perfumes on your genitals as they can cause irritation.

Here are some tips for making your periods easier and more comfortable:

- Always 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 or fruit juice.
- Eat foods that are rich in iron like small whole fish, liver, beans, meat, and lots of green vegetables. This will help you to replace the iron lost in bleeding.

WHAT TO USE

Throughout history, 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 kiosks today. So even if you do not have the money to buy pads or tampons, you can deal with your periods just fine.

One of the most common and cheapest materials is clean rags. You can cut them to fit your panty area, sewing several layers of cotton rag on top of each other. Make sure that they are clean. Wash them thoroughly and hang them in a private but sunny place to dry. The sun is a very good disinfectant and kills germs.

Toilet tissue is also inexpensive. You can buy about five rolls of toilet tissue for the cost of one pack of pads. You will need to make a thick long wad of toilet tissue. Sometimes toilet tissue is too rough, however, 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 minimise leakages. If you use pads, you need to throw them down a pit latrine or burn them after use. Do not flush them down the toilet, as they will cause blockage.

Some women use tampons, which are small, hard cotton objects 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 little 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, so you can forget all about the fact that you have your period. But tampons also require extra care. Always wash your hands before and after inserting a tampon. You
also need to change it frequently, because it could cause infection if left in your vagina. Never leave a tampon in for more than 8 hours. Don’t use tampons at night because you may sleep more than 8 hours.

What ever you use—rags, toilet tissue, pads or tampons—change it frequently to avoid staining and bad smells. When menstrual blood gets in contact with air, it develops a stale odour. If your panties or clothes get stained with blood, soak them in cool, mildly salty 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 and still have fun during your periods, and they shouldn’t cause you to miss school or work.
Chapter 4
Girls

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

- Your body will grow, especially the bones in your hips, arms, legs and feet. You will develop a rounder, more womanly shape.
- Your breasts will develop and your nipples will become larger and darker.
- Your genitals will mature, and the walls of your vagina will begin to produce a fluid or discharge.
- You will begin to menstruate each month 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 attractive and are good for feeding babies.
- Wash and clean your genitals—but not inside the vagina—every day. Wear cotton panties.
- It’s a good idea to pay attention to your normal vaginal discharge so that you can notice any changes that might be a sign of a vaginal infection.
- Because an adolescent girl’s menstrual cycle can be very irregular during the first several years, there are no “safe days” against getting pregnant, and there are never any safe days against HIV and other STIs.
- Although cramps, swelling and mood swings are normal, your menstrual cycle does not have to be uncomfortable. Exercises and low-salt diets can help some of these problems. If you have terrible pains or bleed very heavily, see a health worker.