

Precocious puberty in girls

A guide for parents



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What is precocious puberty?

'Precocious puberty' is a medical term which means that your daughter has started puberty (started developing) at an early age. In most cases there is no underlying cause – the hormones which control puberty have simply been activated earlier than they should have. We do not know why this happens to some girls.

The term precocious puberty is only used when a girl starts puberty before the age of eight. However, all girls are individuals, so the rate at which puberty progresses will differ. For example, we would definitely treat a five-year-old girl, but not necessarily an eight-year-old who is showing signs of puberty but developing slowly.

Occasionally, we may treat a nine- or 10-year-old if they are developing very rapidly and this is causing them distress.

What are the signs of precocious puberty?

The most obvious sign of puberty in girls is development of the breasts. They may also have some pubic and underarm hair. And, your daughter may be growing fast, have some vaginal discharge (or sometimes, periods), monthly abdominal cramps, greasy hair and spots – all things that you would normally expect in teenagers. You may also have noticed that she is beginning to behave like a teenager – being a bit moody, irritable and tearful.

Puberty is accompanied by a growth spurt and you may have noticed that your daughter is tall compared with her classmates. However, because she will stop growing sooner than her friends, she is unlikely to end up as a particularly tall adult.

These signs can be very distressing, both for your daughter, who may feel embarrassed and confused by the physical changes and emotions, and for the rest of the family who feel that their little girl is growing up too fast.

Precocious puberty naturally causes anxiety and distress within the family. It is difficult enough coping with the physical and psychological changes in a child that puberty brings when it happens at the expected time, let alone when it happens several years too soon. 'Holding back' puberty for a few years may be the best option.

Why did it happen to my daughter?

In most instances, there is no obvious reason. Sometimes, there is a family history of early puberty, but often this is not the case. It is not caused by anything you have or haven't done, for example the type of food your daughter eats. It is nobody's fault, and there is nothing you could have done to prevent it from happening.

Is there any treatment for it?

Yes, there is treatment that will prevent puberty from going further. There are medications available, which are normally given at regular intervals by injection. They release a hormone which acts on the pituitary gland in the brain to stop the production of the hormones which bring about puberty.

The endocrine nurse and doctor will discuss each of these injections with you before the start of your daughter's treatment.

Whether or not your daughter should have treatment depends on several things, including:

- how quickly she is developing;
- how old she is;
- how tall she is likely to be; and
- how she and the rest of the family are coping with these changes.

The nurse and doctor will take all these points into consideration when they discuss treatment options with you.

How long will treatment last?

Ideally, your daughter will receive treatment until she is around 10 and a half or at the end of primary 6. However, you may choose to stop treatment earlier, after discussion with your consultant, if you and your daughter feel that she can cope with puberty.

Once treatment is completed it can take some time for puberty to restart.

Does the treatment have any side effects?

There are no known serious side effects. However, some girls may have a small vaginal bleed after the first injection. Some girls can experience headaches when they start treatment, but these should go away after a few days. Mild reddening, itching or bruising around the injection site is not uncommon and is nothing to worry about.

Symptoms of tummy pain, vaginal discharge or moodiness are not a side effect of treatment but may show that the effect of the injection is wearing off too soon and that we may have to change the timing of the injections.

There is no evidence that your daughter's fertility in the future will be affected by the treatment she has had for precocious puberty. Normal menstruation and fertility is reported after stopping treatment.

What tests will my daughter have?

Before she starts treatment your daughter will have to come into hospital for a number of investigations. She may have the following tests.

- A blood test. This involves inserting a cannula (a small tube) in a vein in her hand or arm. This allows us to measure the levels of the puberty hormones she is producing.
- A pelvic ultrasound examination to assess how her uterus (womb) and ovaries are developing. Ultrasound is a painless procedure, exactly the same as used in pregnant women. It must be done on a full bladder, so we will give your daughter something to drink about an hour beforehand.
- An MRI scan.
- An x-ray of her wrist to check the age of her bones.

You will be able to discuss these tests and investigations with your nurse or hospital doctor.

After treatment has started we rarely do further blood tests, but it is important for your daughter to have regular checks of her growth and development.

What should I tell my daughter?

Your daughter will naturally be curious about the changes to her body and why she is attending hospital. Because she is so young you may not yet have told her 'the facts of life' and you may not be sure how to explain what is happening to her. It is important that she understands what is going on as this will help to reduce her fears. Try to explain things to her in language that she understands and encourage her to ask questions. The main points to make are that these changes will eventually happen to all her friends, but in her case they have started sooner than usual. It is essential you reassure her that these changes are normal.

Should we tell other people?

This is up to you to decide as a family. Children are curious, and your daughter's friends may ask questions about why she is attending hospital. If she is particularly tall and mature-looking compared with her friends, people may also remark on this. One of the main problems affecting girls with precocious puberty is that people think they are older than they actually are. This often causes confusion and reinforces the feeling of being 'different'. Also, her moody behaviour may become noticeable at school and may affect her classwork. It is not uncommon for the child and her family to feel guilty about precocious puberty, and keeping everything a secret may reinforce this.

There are a number of books available that will help explain precocious puberty. Here are some suggestions.

Growing up – Usborne
Hair in Funny Places – Babette Cole

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