

# Precocious puberty in boys

A guide for parents  
and carers



This leaflet was created by the SPEG Nurses' Sub-Group. SPEG (Scottish Paediatric Endocrine Group) is a network of health-care professionals in Scotland who have a particular interest in the care of children and young adults who have endocrine conditions.

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## **What is precocious puberty?**

### **What is precocious puberty?**

‘Precocious puberty’ is a medical term which means that your son has started puberty (started developing at an earlier age than usual). It may be the hormones which control puberty have simply been activated earlier than they should have, however it is important to rule out any medical cause for this to be happening.

The term 'precocious puberty' is only used when a boy starts puberty before the age of nine. However all boys are individuals, so the rate at which puberty starts and progresses may vary. Occasionally we may offer treatment to a ten or eleven year old if they have rapid growth and development causing him distress.

### **What are the signs of precocious puberty?**

The most obvious sign of puberty in boys is enlargement of the testicles and increase in the length of the penis. They may also have some pubic and under arm hair. Your son may be growing fast, have greasy hair and spots. These are all things you would normally expect in teenagers.

You may also have noticed that he is beginning to behave like a teenager emotionally by being a bit moody and irritable.

Normal puberty is accompanied by a growth spurt and you may have noticed that your son is tall compared to his classmates. However he may stop growing sooner than some of his friends and he may not end up particularly tall as an adult. These signs can be very distressing, both for your son, who may feel embarrassed and confused by the physical changes and emotions, and for the rest of the family who feel that their son is growing up too fast.

### **Should we tell other people?**

This is up to you to decide as a family. Children are curious and your son may ask questions about why he is attending hospital. If he is particularly tall and mature looking compared with his friends, people may also remark on this. One of the main problems affecting boys 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 his moody behaviour may become noticeable at school and may affect his class work. It is not uncommon for the child and his family to feel guilty about precocious puberty, and keeping everything a secret may reinforce this.

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

Growing up – Usbourne

Hair in funny places - Babette Cole

On your marks get set grow – Lynda Madras

What's happening to me? – Alex Frith

leading up to the next injection; these 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 need to change the timings of the injections.

There is no evidence that your sons fertility in the future will be affected by the treatment he has had for precocious puberty.

### **What should I tell my son?**

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

It is difficult enough coping with the physical and psychological changes of puberty in a child 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 son?**

Often there is no obvious reason for puberty starting early, however it is important to rule out if there is a cause for this. Sometimes there is a family history of early puberty, but often this is not the case. It is important to know that this early puberty is not caused by anything you have or haven't done, for example the type of food your son eats. It is nobody's fault, and there is nothing you could have done to prevent it from happening.

### **What tests will my son have?**

Before treatment is offered your son will attend hospital for a number of investigations to determine whether he does have precocious puberty.

He may have the following tests,

- A blood test. This involves inserting a cannula (a small tube) in a vein in his hand or arm. This allows us to measure the levels of the puberty hormones he is producing.

- An MRI scan of the head. This is to check the hormone producing areas in the brain.
- An x-ray of his wrist to check the age of his 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 son to have regular checks of his growth and development to monitor the treatment.

### **Is there any treatment for it?**

Yes, there is treatment that will prevent puberty from progressing further. There are medications available, which are given by injection at regular intervals. There are different preparations available and these can be discussed with you after consideration on what's most appropriate for your son, they are in the form of 3 or 6 monthly injections. 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 these injections with you before the start of your son's treatment. Whether or not your son should have treatment depends on several things, including:

- How quickly he is developing
- How old he is
- How tall he is likely to be
- How he 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 son will receive treatment until he is around 11 years old. However you may choose to stop treatment earlier, after discussion with your consultant, if you and your son feel that he 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. Some boys may 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 moodiness may be present around the time