

Breast Development during Puberty

The beginning of breast development is one of the earliest signs of puberty in girls, the appearance of pubic hair being the other. Therefore, pubic hair and breast buds can appear close together. Estrogen is the hormone that is responsible for breast growth and development.

Breast development normally begins about 2 to 3 years before the menstrual period begins. Breast development takes several years.

There are 5 stages of breast development. A young lady generally has to reach stages 4 to 5, before periods begin. In the first stage (during childhood) the breasts are flat.

Next comes the **breast bud stage**. In this stage, the nipple and areola are slightly raised as the breast tissue first begins to grow. The very early breast buds are something you might miss, because the change from flat breasts is so slight. However, this beginning breast tissue can be uncomfortable and feel hard. This can be a cause for alarm. Be assured that this is all very **normal** and does not suggest a tumor has developed.

Next, the **breasts start to enlarge**. Often this happens initially in a conical shape, and later on in a rounder shape. The areola begins to darken and get puffy. The nipple may point outward now, but often it remains flat through puberty, and only changes to an erect nipple when a woman gets pregnant. This is the time of most rapid growth. Some teens may continue to experience breast growth for awhile after their periods start.

Some – but not all – girls go through a stage where the nipple and the areola form a separate mound from the actual breast ("mound on mound"). This is stage 4. The whole process from the breast bud stage until stage 5 usually takes about 3-4 years.

During breast growth, you may experience some tenderness in your breasts. This is normal. Also, the skin may be itchy. Stretch marks can develop but will fade out over time.

Breast development can start as early as 8 years of age or as late as 13 years. If a girl does not have breast buds or pubic hair by age 13, it is recommended that she see a pediatric/adolescent gynecologist. The same is true if a girl does not get her period by age 15. This is called delayed puberty, and there are several reasons for the delay or absence of development. It is advisable to look into the situation.

Breasts exist in many sizes and shapes, most of which are considered normal. Genetics and weight help determine final breast size. Some teens and adult women have a difference in the size of their breasts from one side to the other. This discrepancy may be minimal or severe. When one side barely develops, this is considered a congenital lack of breast tissue. Some teens/women have very large breasts for their body. This situation may cause neck and back pain and other problems. Any breast concerns should be discussed with your physician or nurse practitioner.