

Puberty, eating disorders and body image



What is puberty?

Puberty is a significant stage of development, that includes physical, emotional and hormonal changes that mark the transition from childhood into adulthood. For females, puberty typically begins between the ages of 8 and 13. However, it may start later or it may begin earlier, which is known as precocious puberty. It is necessary and natural for physical changes in body shape, size and weight to occur alongside the development of secondary sex characteristics such as breasts, hips and pubic hair. When and how puberty is experienced is unique to each person.

How does puberty impact body image and eating disorders?

Puberty is a time when self-esteem, body image, eating and exercise attitudes and behaviours are influenced, as well as when body comparisons

and exposure to body and appearance ideals in media and social media occurs more intensely. More weight and appearance-based comments, teasing and bullying can also be experienced.

For some people, puberty can be uncomfortable and distressing, where body dissatisfaction and other mental health concerns emerge. Unfortunately, when someone is feeling dissatisfied with their body, weight or how they look they are at greater risk of engaging in behaviours such as dieting to change their body and the way they feel. This combined with other factors, can contribute to the development of disordered eating and eating disorders.

“ When I went through puberty in my late teens and saw a natural increase on the scales, I thought that the ‘right’ thing to do was to regain my earlier, pre-puberty body weight. Now, after treatment, I see that increase in weight for what it was: a completely normal, healthy transition from childhood to adulthood.”

This is of particular concern for young women because:

Females are

25% more likely

to report some level of body dissatisfaction in their adolescence than males¹.

30%

of women say puberty impacted the way they felt about their body in a negative way²

48%

of young women going through puberty experience body image issues (66% more likely than the general female population)³

7%

of young women going through puberty experience anorexia nervosa (3.5 times more likely than the general female population)⁴

Females who experience puberty earlier than average are

more likely to have an eating disorder⁵

Tips to support the wellbeing of girls during puberty:

Remember puberty is natural

It can be helpful to remind yourself that these body changes are necessary and something that everyone experiences in different ways and at the time that is right for your body.

Talk to your body like you would a friend

You wouldn't say negative things about a friend, so try to talk to and about your body with kindness and respect.

Focus on what your body can do

Admire what bodies allow us to do, and celebrate non-appearance-based qualities and strengths in yourself and others.

Move your body for joy

Aim to move your body in ways that you enjoy that bring you joy and support your wellbeing, rather than moving for your weight or shape.

Curate your feed

Follow social media accounts that align with your values, and that make you feel good. Take a break or mute accounts if you find you are comparing yourself and your body more.

Talking helps

If you're struggling, you're not alone, speak to a trusted adult or health professional.



Get support



Call Butterfly National Helpline

1800 ED HOPE (1800 33 4673)

or visit [Butterfly.org.au](https://butterfly.org.au)
to chat online or email,

7 days a week,
8am-midnight (AEST/AEDT).



Resources

Read stories of lived experience
and find useful resources at

[Butterfly.org.au/women](https://butterfly.org.au/women)



References

- 1 Butterfly Foundation, 2024. Butterfly BodyKind Youth Survey 2024.
- 2 Butterfly Foundation, 2025. Body Image in Women Survey
- 3 Liptember Foundation, 2024. Uncovering the reality: examining multi-dimensional aspects of women's mental health in Australia, 2024.
- 4 Liptember Foundation, 2024. Uncovering the reality: examining multi-dimensional aspects of women's mental health in Australia, 2024.
- 5 Klump KL. Puberty as a critical risk period for eating disorders: a review of human and animal studies, 2013