

# Understanding Your Teen Son's Sexual and Reproductive Health: A Primer for Parents

Adolescence is a time of significant physical, emotional, and social changes. As parents, understanding your son's sexual and reproductive health is key to providing guidance and fostering open communication. Although most of these changes start during the middle school years (ages 11-14), it's not unusual for them to begin as early as age 9 and as late as age 15. Genetics plays a big role in when puberty begins and when it ends. Most changes are completed by late adolescence or young adulthood. It is important to note that all males go through the same stages of pubertal development but at different rates and timing. Testosterone mediates most of the changes in males. There are accompanying [Parent Briefs](#) for several of these topics.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

### Signs of Physical Development

#### 1. Growth Spurts

**Height Increase:** A rapid increase in height is one of the most noticeable signs and also one of the latest signs. Boys typically grow 2–4 inches annually during their growth spurt.

**Weight Gain:** Increased muscle mass and broader shoulders accompany growth in height.

**Disproportionate Growth:** Hands, feet, and legs often grow before the torso, causing temporary awkwardness in proportions.

#### 2. Enlargement of Testes and Scrotum

One of the earliest signs of puberty.

The testes enlarge, and the scrotum darkens and becomes more textured.

It's very common for the left testicle to be larger or hang lower than the other.

#### 3. Development of Pubic, Facial, and Body Hair

**Pubic Hair:** Begins as fine, sparse hair around the base of the penis, becoming coarser and more widespread.

**Facial Hair:** Usually starts on the upper lip and chin, eventually spreading to the cheeks and jawline.

**Body Hair:** Increased hair on the arms, legs, chest, and underarms.

#### 4. Deepening of the Voice

The larynx (Adam's Apple; voice box) grows larger, and the vocal cords lengthen, causing the voice to deepen.

Temporary "voice cracking" is common during this phase.

#### 5. Increased Muscle Development

Muscles, particularly in the arms, chest, and shoulders - but in general all muscles - grow during puberty.

Boys develop greater physical strength compared to girls of the same age.

#### 6. Growth of the Penis

The penis grows in length and then in girth, typically after the enlargement of the testes.

#### 7. Skin and Hair Changes

**Oil Production:** Increased activity of sebaceous (oil) glands may lead to complexion issues, common on the face, back or chest.

**Body Odor:** Enhanced activity of sweat glands results in stronger body odor, requiring better hygiene practices.

#### 8. Nocturnal Emissions ("Wet Dreams")

Involuntary ejaculation during sleep is a normal part of sexual maturation. Not all boys experience this, which is perfectly normal.

#### 9. Increased Sexual Awareness

Boys may experience sexual arousal and erections more frequently as a result of hormonal changes. During puberty, erections are sometimes a nuisance since they may occur unpredictably at any time and are usually not associated with sexual content.

Boys may feel self-conscious about these changes, particularly if they develop earlier or later than their peers. A reminder that genetics plays a big role in the timing and tempo of these changes. Open communication with parents or trusted adults can help ease concerns.

#### When to Consult a Clinician (Healthcare Provider)

If there are no signs of pubertal changes by age 14

If puberty begins before age 9 or, progresses very quickly or seems abnormal.

### Social and Emotional Changes Related to Sexuality

#### 1. Development of Sexual Identity

**Awareness of Sexual Orientation:** Adolescents begin to recognize and explore their sexuality (e.g., heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, etc.). It's not uncommon for boys at this stage to be unsure or not to label their sexuality as well.

**Self-Exploration:** Boys may question their feelings and attractions, which can lead to self-reflection or confusion as they define their sexual identity.

#### 2. Increased Sexual Awareness and Curiosity

**Interest in Relationships:** Attraction to others becomes more pronounced, and boys may experience romantic feelings or develop crushes with males or females.



**Curiosity About Sexuality:** Adolescents often become curious about sexual behaviors, relationships, and intimacy, leading them to seek information from peers, media, or trusted adults.

### 3. Physical Attraction and Desire

**Hormonal Influence:** Rising levels of testosterone heighten physical attraction and sexual desire.

**Fantasy and Arousal:** Boys may experience an increase in sexual fantasies, arousal, and erections, sometimes in unfamiliar or socially challenging situations (i.e. school, other public places).

### 4. Peer Influence and Social Pressure

**Conforming to Peer Norms:** Peers play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward relationships and sexual behavior, sometimes leading to pressure to engage in sexual activities.

**Comparison to Others:** Adolescents often compare their physical development and experiences to their peers, impacting self-esteem and confidence. It is important to remember that their perception is their reality and being seen as different from their peers heightens their concerns.

### 5. Development of Intimate Relationships

**First Relationships:** Boys often begin exploring romantic and intimate relationships (with either males or females), learning about emotional attachment and the complexities of being close to someone.

**Navigating Boundaries:** Adolescents must learn to set and respect boundaries in relationships, which can be challenging during this developmental stage.

### 6. Struggles with Body Image

**Self-Consciousness:** Physical changes, or perceived differences from their peers, can lead to self-consciousness or insecurity about their appearance.

**Masculinity Expectations:** Societal stereotypes about masculinity may influence how boys perceive themselves and their roles in relationships.

### 7. Development of Emotional Regulation

**Mood Swings:** Hormonal fluctuations can lead to mood swings, frustration, or irritability.

**Expression of Emotions:** Societal norms may discourage boys from openly expressing feelings, potentially leading to internalized emotions or unhealthy coping mechanisms.

### 8. Exploration of Sexual Behaviors

**Experimentation:** Adolescents may begin to experiment with sexual behaviors, either alone (e.g., masturbation) or with partners (male or female), as part of their normal sexual development.

### 9. Need for Privacy

**Increased Independence:** Boys often seek more privacy as they explore their sexuality and personal boundaries.

**Desire for Autonomy:** They may resist parental oversight as they navigate relationships and their sense of self.

## 10. Emotional Challenges and Vulnerabilities

**Fear of Rejection:** Romantic interests can bring new vulnerabilities, including fear of rejection or heartbreak.

**Confusion and Shame:** Lack of accurate information or support can lead to confusion or feelings of shame about sexual thoughts or behaviors.

## Key Sexual Health Risk Factors for Adolescent Males

### 1. Lack of Knowledge About Sexual Health

**Misinformation:** Adolescents may receive inaccurate information about sex from peers, media, or online sources.

**Limited Education:** Inadequate sexual health education can leave boys unprepared to make informed decisions about contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and consent. Parents should advocate for comprehensive, skills-based sexual health education in schools.

### 2. Early Sexual Activity

**Risky Behaviors:** Early initiation of sexual activity is often associated with lower rates of condom and contraceptive use.

**Inexperience:** Adolescents may lack the skills to negotiate safe sex practices or recognize unhealthy relationships.

### 3. Inconsistent Use of Protection

**Condom Use:** Adolescent males may not use condoms correctly or consistently, increasing the risk of STIs and unplanned pregnancies.

**Lack of Dual Protection:** Failure to use condoms correctly and consistently alongside other female partner contraceptive methods such as oral contraceptives (the pill), intrauterine devices, contraceptive injections or patches, further elevates risks.

### 4. High Rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

**Biological Susceptibility:** Males, especially those engaging in high-risk behaviors, are at increased risk for STIs like chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV.

**Undiagnosed Infections:** Some STIs are asymptomatic in males, leading to delayed diagnosis and treatment.

### 5. Peer and Social Pressures

**Pressure to Conform:** Cultural or peer norms may encourage risky sexual behaviors, such as multiple sexual partners or unprotected sex.

**Fear of Judgment:** Adolescents may avoid seeking advice or testing for fear of being judged by peers or adults. Parents should be askable and non-judgmental in conversations with their sons.

### 6. Substance Use and Risk-Taking

**Impaired Judgment:** Alcohol and drug use are strongly linked to increased risk-taking behaviors, including unprotected sex.

**Co-Occurrence of Risks:** Substance use often overlaps with other risk factors, compounding potential harm.



## 7. Lack of Access to Healthcare

**Barriers to Services:** Adolescents may face barriers such as cost, lack of transportation, or concerns about confidentiality when seeking sexual health care.

**Reluctance to Seek Help:** Embarrassment, fear of judgment or lack of confidentiality can prevent boys from accessing testing, treatment, or counseling.

## 8. Exposure to Pornography (See [Parent Brief on Understanding Boys and Pornography](#))

**Unrealistic Expectations:** Pornography can create distorted views of relationships and consent, potentially influencing risky behaviors.

**Impact on Behavior:** Adolescents exposed to explicit content may be more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors.

## 9. Sexual Violence and Consent Issues

**Lack of Understanding:** Boys may not receive adequate education about consent and respectful relationships.

**Vulnerability:** Males are also at risk of sexual coercion or dating violence, which can have lasting psychological effects. Lack of information on the dangers of internet “sextortion” may have significant consequences as well.

## 10. LGBTQ+ Specific Risks

**Stigma and Discrimination:** LGBTQ+ adolescents may face unique challenges, including limited access to inclusive sexual health education and healthcare services.

**Increased STI Risk:** Gay, bisexual, and other males who have sex with males are disproportionately affected by STIs, including HIV.

## 11. Unplanned Pregnancy

**Responsibility Avoidance:** Some adolescent males may not fully understand their role in preventing pregnancy or feel it is solely the female partner’s responsibility.

**Lack of Communication Skills:** Poor communication between partners can contribute to inconsistent contraceptive use.

## 12. Mental Health Challenges

**Emotional Well-Being:** Mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression, can influence decision-making and increase risky behaviors.

**Co-Occurring Risks:** Poor mental health may intersect with substance use or unsafe sexual practices.

## Additional Resources for Teenage Boys’ Health

### 1. Books and Guides (See “For Parents” link on website for additional resources)

- [“Guy Stuff: The Body Book for Boys” by Cara Natterson, MD:](#) An approachable guide for boys to understand their changing bodies.
- [“Will Puberty Last My Whole Life? REAL Answers to REAL Questions from Preteens About Body Changes, Sex, and Other Growing-Up Stuff” by Julie Giesy Metzger RN MN and Robert Lehman MD:](#) Provides clear, factual information about puberty and health.

### 2. Websites

- [Young Men’s Health Guide by Boston Children’s Hospital:](#) Covers topics such as sexual health, emotional health, fitness, and more.
- [CDC’s Adolescent and School Health Resources:](#) Provides health and wellness information specifically for adolescents.
- [American Academy of Pediatrics \(HealthyChildren.org\):](#) Offers parent-friendly resources for discussing puberty, mental health, and sexual health.
- [Amaze.org](#) (For elementary and middle school boys and parents)

### 3. Apps

- [Circle of 6:](#) Designed for teens and young adults to ensure safety and provide quick access to help in uncomfortable or dangerous situations.
- [Headspace](#) or [Calm:](#) Tools to support emotional health through mindfulness and stress management.

### 4. Helplines

- [Boys Town National Hotline \(1-800-448-3000\):](#) A confidential resource for adolescents to discuss concerns about relationships, health, and more.
- [Planned Parenthood Chat/Text \(1-800-230-7526\):](#) Provides reliable sexual health information.

*Supported in part with an unrestricted educational grant from Merck & Co.*

