

## Early Puberty

Early or "precocious puberty" is an uncommon condition that occurs when the physical changes of puberty begin before age 8 for girls and before age 9 for boys. Many healthy children are now entering puberty at a younger age than doctors have traditionally seen, according to Andrew B. Muir, MD, a pediatric endocrinology specialist, and one of the leading experts in the field of precocious puberty.

### ***Top 5 Signs and Symptoms of Early Puberty in Girls Before Age 8 and Boys Before Age 9, from the Mayo Clinic***

1. Adult body odor
2. Acne
3. Rapid growth
4. Pubic or underarm hair
5. Girls may experience breast growth and menstruation. Boys may develop enlarged testicles and penis, deepening voice, and facial hair (often grows first on the upper lip)

Dr. Muir says that the estimates on precocious puberty vary. It happens to anywhere from 1 in 500 to 1 in 5,000 children. Girls are 5-10 times more likely to have precocious puberty than boys. Compared to girls, early puberty in boys is more often associated with a defined cause that requires treatment.

### ***What Moms Should Know about Early Puberty***

Andrew B. Muir, MD, a pediatric endocrinology specialist, and one of the leading experts in the field of precocious puberty, provides perspective on this condition: most often, children who develop signs of puberty before the "normal" age have no definable cause. That doesn't mean there is no cause. It just means we aren't smart enough to find the cause.

Probably less than 5% of these children receive hormone treatments to stop the development, but most do not need any treatment.

Occasionally, children will be unwittingly exposed to hormones in the environment that cause early puberty. An example is shampoos that contain placental extract. A report in the New England Journal of Medicine in February 2007 suggested tea tree oil and lavender in skin care products could cause breast development in boys. Transient ovarian cysts, low thyroid hormone levels, and a variety of different types of tumors are more common causes of precocious puberty.

Girls with puberty starting before 8 years and boys with puberty before 9 years should be evaluated by a physician. Most of these children are normal, but a small number have abnormal causes of puberty that need treatment. If a child needs medical treatment for precocious puberty, it should be supervised by an endocrinologist, preferably one who specializes in pediatric care.

Children with early puberty and their parents often face psychological challenges related to teasing and low self-esteem. Affected children look mature, but their brains still develop at an age-appropriate pace.

One must therefore be careful to keep expectations commensurate with their age, rather than their appearance.

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