What's Going On? Why Am I Changing?

Why am I changing? What is puberty? What is this "period" all about? What is happening to my body?

Suddenly, changes are beginning to take place in you and in your friends. It can seem confusing and embarrassing if you don't understand it all. This brochure will try to answer your questions about these changes and feelings in simple, medical terms.

Puberty

Puberty is the time in your life when you stop being a little girl and begin to mature physically, emotionally, and intellectually into a woman. Puberty is part of life—every person experiences it, even boys!

Puberty is an exciting phase of your life! As you begin to understand the way your body works and the reasons for all these changes, you will be amazed at the incredible way your body works!

Your emotions may change from moment to moment. You may feel happy and on a cloud one day and under a cloud the next! You may start crying at the slightest word or look. *Don't worry!* The hormones causing your *physical* changes are rushing through your body affecting your *emotions* as well. *You are very normal!* Soon your body will adjust to the changes and you will feel more relaxed.

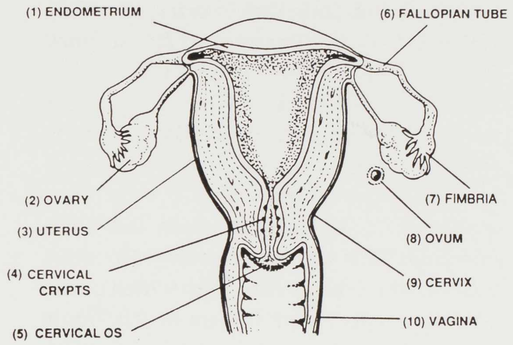
Your Reproductive System

Your *female reproductive system* is where many changes occur each day of your menstrual cycle. Your female reproductive organs include two *ovaries,* two *Fallopian tubes,* the *uterus,* and the *vagina.* The ovaries, tubes, and uterus are located in the lower abdominal region called the *pelvis.* The base of the uterus is the *cervix,* a pear-shaped muscle. Below the cervix is the *vagina,* or "birth canal," a narrow space which exits your body between your legs. This vaginal opening is located between the *urethra* (through which urine exits the body) and the *anus* (through which solid waste—feces—exits the body). The vaginal opening is covered by small folds of skin called the *labia* and this part of your body is termed the *vulva* or "genital area."

Your two ovaries are located on either side of your uterus, or "womb." Each ovary is about one inch long and contains thousands of minute egg cells. After puberty, hormones in your body cause your ovaries to release one egg cell each month.

The egg leaves the ovary and moves into one of the Fallopian tubes. This process is called *ovulation.* The egg cell then moves through the Fallopian tubes into the uterus. The uterus has prepared for the egg by producing a "nest"—a soft, spongy tissue-blood layer called the *endometrium.* Most of the time, the egg is *not* fertilized, so the endometrium begins to dissolve into a reddish fluid and flows from the uterus, through the vagina, to the outside of your body. This flow is called *menstruation,* or your "period."

Menstruation usually begins about 14 days after ovulation.



FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE ANATOMY

Body Changes

Things start happening when the pituitary gland under your brain sends a message to your ovaries to produce a hormone called *estrogen* which causes many of the changes you experience during puberty. For many girls, the first sign of puberty is the "growth spurt," in which you may quickly grow several inches in a few months. Your breasts will start to develop, although the amount of growth will vary in each girl. Curly hair will begin to grow in your pubic area (between your legs where they join your body), and hair will also grow on your legs and under your arms. Your waist often gets thinner and your hips get wider. A moist, white, yellowish, or clear fluid may collect on your underpants. This fluid comes naturally from the vagina and is called *vaginal discharge.* This is a sign that you will soon begin to menstruate, or have your "period." If this discharge is thick like cottage cheese, has a bad smell, or if it itches, have your doctor check it out.

Menstruation is one of the biggest changes that will ever occur in your body. It is a normal, healthy body function. Menstruation is only one part or stage of the *menstrual cycle* which will *return* in your body approximately every 28 days. In the beginning, your menstrual cycle may not be this regular; you may only have periods every two or three months. Your unique cycle may take about two years to regulate itself. The only "normal" thing about it is that every girl is different!

Some girls begin menstruating as early as nine and others when they're sixteen. Each girl has her own "biological clock." Generally, your first period may start about two years after your breasts begin to develop, and soon after you have some hair under your arms and in your pubic area; vaginal discharge is also an indication that menstruation may soon begin. Menstrual periods usually last three to seven days; but remember, each girl is different. The flow is usually heavier at the beginning of the period than at the end. However, only about one-half cup of menstrual fluid is released during the *entire* monthly "period." Your body quickly replaces this lost blood. You may experience discomfort called *"menstrual cramps"* during your period, usually in your lower abdomen or lower back. Sometimes you feel a constant dull ache or a "feeling of heaviness." The cramps may be caused by natural body chemicals