

# Discussing Menstruation with Young Children

This resource is for all parents or guardians of children who are showing early signs of menstruation and are looking for support to discuss menstruation with their children. If this topic is discussed in schools, it is generally discussed near the end of grade 5. Some children may have started menstruating before this time. This document is meant to encourage communication with children and is not meant to replace medical advice. Parents and guardians are encouraged to discuss their children's growth and development with their child's doctor.

This document uses body part words such as vagina, uterus and breast rather than language that is gender specific, for example 'girls get their periods'. Toronto Public Health respects people's use of other words to suit their identities and cultures.

**gender identity:** a person's internal and individual experience of gender. It is a person's sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum. A person's gender identity may be the same as or different from their birth-assigned sex. A person's gender identity is fundamentally different from and not related to their sexual orientation.

Source: [The 519 – Glossary of Terms](#)

## *When can first menstruation be expected?*

Many parents, guardians and children are concerned about the timing of pubertal changes compared to others. Genetic factors, as well as environmental influences, can result in wide variations of when first period, also known as menarche, will occur. With some exceptions related to specific medical conditions, most children's development falls into the common age range of 10-15 years of age, with an average age of 12 (The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, 2019). Some children get their first period as early as 8 or 9 years old, and while this is considered early, it is common. Discussing menstruation with children prior to their first period will help to destigmatize this natural bodily function.

When children display secondary sex characteristics (underarm and/or pubic hair, breast development, or acne) significantly earlier than expected, it is important to consult with a doctor because it may be a sign of an underlying medical condition.

Source: [The Hospital for Sick Kids Children, About Kids Health](#)

The onset of puberty can bring on an array of emotions for many children. It is not unusual for children to wish to delay the onset of puberty, especially children entering puberty earlier than their friends. Having open and honest conversations with your children about bodies will help them process their feelings.

With trans, non-binary or gender creative children, puberty can bring particular challenges for the child. You may consider consulting with Sick Kids' Transgender Youth Clinic or Rainbow Health Ontario (see links under **Helpful Resources**).

### *Before you begin the conversation.*

#### **When do I bring up menstruation?**

Parents and guardians can use teachable moments to discuss menstruation with even very young children. For example, you might bring up menstruation during advertisements for menstrual products or, during shopping trips, you might explain menstruation when purchasing menstrual products. A matter of fact approach can help reduce the taboo around this subject and help children feel positive about their bodies.

#### **Know the Signs**

There are certain developmental milestones that can provide clues to when a child's first period will come. Breast budding, when the area around the nipple begins to swell, can be a first sign. The first period typically occurs within 2 years of breast budding. The development of pubic hair and/or underarm hair also precedes a first period. Vaginal discharge may occur within the months prior to first period.

#### **Know the Facts**

Parents and guardians may need to refresh their knowledge about how and why periods occur. The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada's website – [www.YourPeriod.ca](http://www.YourPeriod.ca) is a great place to start.

#### **Be Empathetic**

If you have menstruated, you might recall how you felt when you first experienced it, or otherwise imagine how your child might feel experiencing their first period. Coming from a place of empathy will set a positive tone for your conversation.

#### **Make Time**

Finding the right time can be challenging with busy schedules, but look for everyday opportunities for when you can talk privately with your child. Talking about body changes is an on-going conversation and may require going over the facts and answering questions multiple times and not one 'big talk'.

### *What to say?*

#### **Share Experiences**

It can be helpful to share your own experiences about body changes and don't be afraid to share laughs and have fun. *"When I first started to notice my body changing..."*

#### **Share the facts**

Share the facts about menstruation and reassure your child that their body is doing exactly what it should be doing. *"Menstruation is another name for period. About once a month, you will get your period, which is the shedding of the uterus lining..."*

### **Speak in simple language and give concrete examples**

Tell the child what to expect. *"A mixture of fluid and blood will come out of the vagina for 3 to 5 days". "Let me show you how to use a menstrual pad, tampon, etc." "After disposing of the menstrual pad, tampon, etc., you put it in the garbage and wash your hands".*

### **Acknowledge Feelings**

Children can react differently to their body changes, so it is important to acknowledge their feelings and be patient. *"Sometimes growing up can feel scary". "Just because your body is maturing doesn't mean you have to act more mature, you can continue to act your age".*

### **Keep the door open**

Keeping the door open for more questions and concerns can help the child understand that you are there for them and may make them feel more comfortable to approach you. *"You can always ask me questions about your body or share how you are feeling".*

### ***Be kind to yourself.***

Having conversations about bodies can be challenging or embarrassing. Engaging in conversations often will increase the chances parents, caregivers, and their children will become more comfortable talking about menstruation and other body changes.

Remember, if you have any concerns about your child's development, a medical consultation with your family doctor would be appropriate.

### **Helpful Resources**

[The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada, Your Period](#)

[Rainbow Health Ontario](#)

[Teaching Puberty: You Can Do It!](#)

[Teen Health Source](#)

[The Hospital for Sick Children, About Kids Health](#)

[The Hospital for Sick Children, Transgender Youth Clinic](#)

## Tip Sheet for Discussing Menstruation

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Using anatomical diagrams (see next page), can help review the process of ovulation and introduce the topic of menstruation.

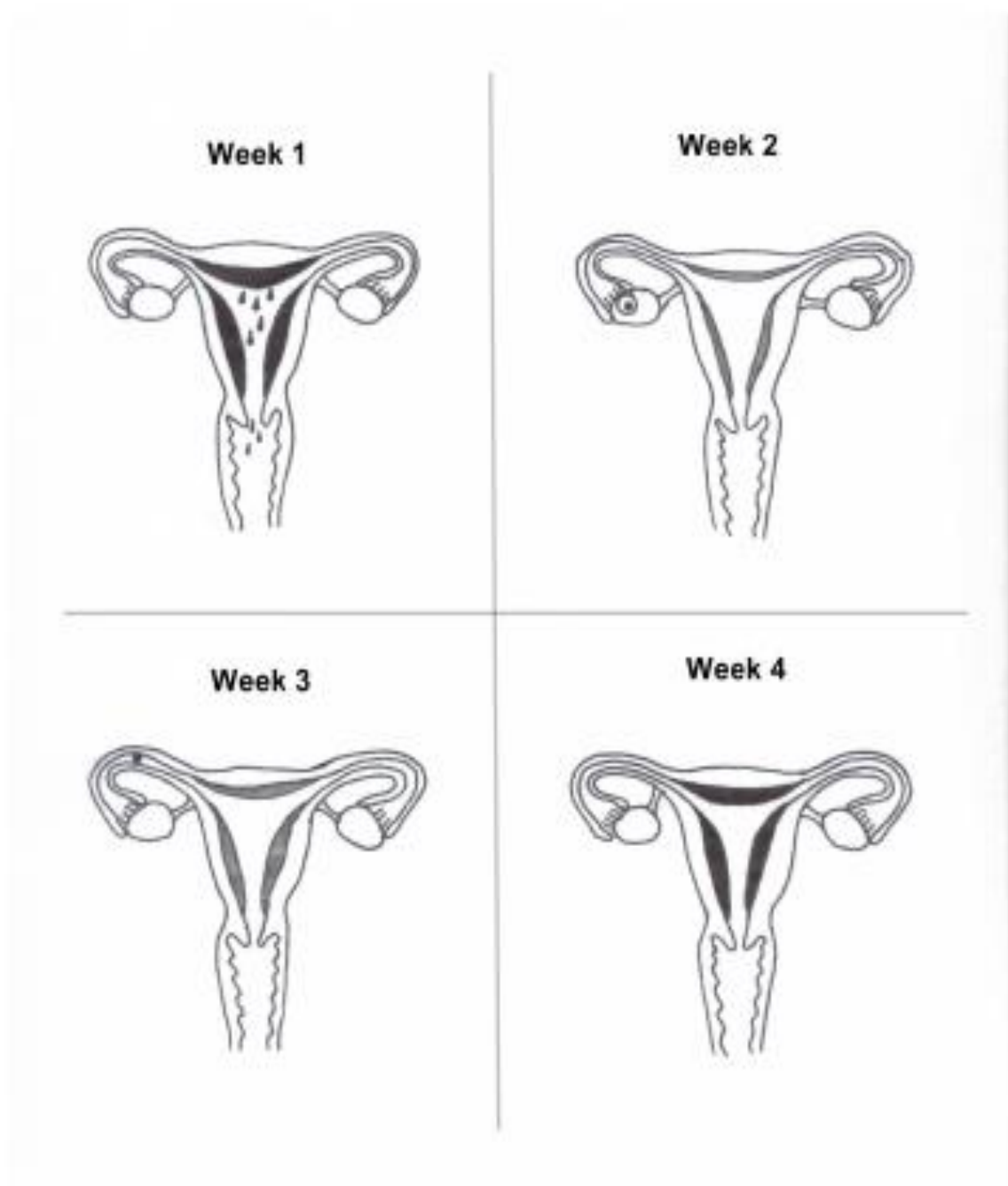
### *Tips for parents and guardians...*

- "Let's talk about how menstruation, or getting a period, happens."
- "Ovulation (the release of an ovum, also called an egg cell, from the ovary into the fallopian tube) occurs about once a month."
- "Most of the time the ovum does not meet with a sperm cell in the fallopian tube, so it then dissolves. About two weeks later, the lining of the uterus, made up of blood and tissue that had been building, is not needed and it will slowly flow out of the uterus through the cervix, then through the vagina to the outside of the body."
- "A first period usually happens between the ages of 9 and 14 years old. It may be earlier or later than this."
- "Secretion of a clear or whitish fluid from the vagina (which may be noticed on the underwear) usually happens in the few months leading up to the first period."
- "Someone would know that their first period had started when they saw some bloody discharge (menstrual fluid) on their underwear or on toilet paper when wiping. It may be brownish, pink, or bright red in colour."
- "This menstrual fluid (about 2 tablespoons to a ½ cup per menstrual period) will come out during the day and night usually for between 3 and 7 days."
- "Pads, tampons, or menstrual cups can be used to catch the menstrual fluid."
- "The next period will occur in the same way in about a month's time. Sometimes periods don't come regularly every month for the first 1-2 years."
- "The first day of each menstrual period can be marked on a calendar so that someone with regular periods may be able to predict when their next period will come."

Source: [Teaching Puberty: You Can Do It!](#)

# The Menstrual Cycle

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Source: [Teaching Puberty: You Can Do It!](#)

## References

The 519 (2019). *The 519 Glossary of Terms*. Retrieved from:  
<http://www.the519.org/education-training/glossary>

The Hospital for Sick Kids Children, About Kids Health (2019). *Puberty*. Retrieved from:  
<https://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/Article?contentid=623&language=English&hub=parenting>

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<https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/health-wellness-care/health-programs-advice/resources-for-schools/sexual-health-resources/>

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (2019). *Menstrual Cycle Basics*. Retrieved from: <https://www.yourperiod.ca/normal-periods/menstrual-cycle-basics/#whatismenstruation>

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