



INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE OF WOMEN
ALLIANCE INTERNATIONALE DES FEMMES



IMPRESSUM

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INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE OF WOMEN
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Entering Womanhood

A Project of International Alliance of Women IAW/AIF



FOREWORD AND THANKS

This booklet is intended to guide girls through an important period of their life. It helps to understand the bodily changes and psychological impacts at the beginning of adulthood. It supports adolescents coping with the various challenges of puberty.

It enhances the chances and the self-confidence of becoming a woman. We hope that many young people will be interested in reading this booklet about the biological life-cycle of women.

We are expressing our great thanks to SWISS SEXUAL HEALTH ¹, which provided us with the copyrights for some selected contents of their excellent booklet “Hé -Les Miss!” ², a booklet for adolescent girls in French and German. In the first place we thank Barbara Berger, executive director, and Daniela Enzler in charge of communication at SWISS SEXUAL HEALTH. Without their precious advice and help an edition of this booklet would not have been possible.

We also say thanks to Joanna Manganara, president of IAW/AIF, and to our colleagues of the IAW/AIF Steering Group. Most of all our thanks go to the seven IAW/AIF member organizations in Cameroon, DR Congo, Pakistan, Zimbabwe and Zambia.

They are actively engaged in promoting the project with expertise, in some selected schools in rural regions. The recommendations by the teaching staff were also very precious.

The coordinators of the IAW/AIF project “Water and Pads” Gudrun Haupter, Germany, and Ursula Nakamura, Switzerland

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¹ <https://www.ippf.org/about-us/member-associations/switzerland>

² <https://www.sante-sexuelle.ch/shop/fr/pour-adolescent-e-s/he-les-miss--a-partir-de-12-ans>

THE PUBERTY, WHAT IS IT ACTUALLY?

Puberty is an exciting stage in life – and a very important one too. Soon, we are no longer a child, but a young girl, a young woman. Puberty is the time of sexual maturation. The body is transformed, first imperceptibly, then suddenly, the first changes become visible. Then the world seems out of step, the parents unbearable, the life more complex, but also more interesting, more stimulating. This is the beginning of puberty. This period is marked by novelty and the unknown. The body changes, so do the feelings and the way of thinking. And not always at the same time, which can be very painful. Things that we were passionate about just yesterday suddenly lose all their interest. Conversely, we discover new things. The body stretches in length, width and sometimes nothing happens at all...

WHAT EXACTLY IS GOING ON?

One morning, that's it: we discover the first pubic hair. Gentle, delicate. You may be slightly frightened, proud or disgusted. All these reactions are normal. It takes time to get used to all these physical changes. And pubic hair is not the only one that grows: it also grows in the armpits and legs. The breasts grow and the first period comes. At puberty, the genitals become active. Since they are used to have children, they are also called reproductive organs. In other words, it means that your body is ready to have a child.

WHEN DOES PUBERTY BEGIN?

No one can say it in advance and it varies from girl to girl. Puberty usually begins between the ages of 9 and 12. At exactly what point, it depends a lot on the genes (hereditary baggage) you received from your parents. This is why there are sometimes very large differences between students in a class at puberty. And also because puberty begins about two years later in boys.

It is on average around the age of 17 that the bodies of young girls finish growing, so their growth is complete. At puberty, the brain and hormones work closely together. The “start signal” of sexual maturation is given by hormones (chemical messengers) in the body. Thus, growth hormones are responsible for bone growth. So we grow up. Sex hormones, on the other hand, guide the growth of the breasts, ovaries and uterus. The body now sweats more, and its smell also changes.

LOTS OF ACTION!

Puberty is therefore a time when a lot happens. No wonder you keep comparing yourself to your best friend, your sister, the girl next door and ask yourself a thousand questions. Until the body has completed its growth, hormones, the brain and the “belly” have regained a certain balance, it takes time. And this time, each young girl lives it in her own way, so differently.

Maybe during this time you have more conflicts with adults. It may be useful to remind them that they too have been young. Everyone has experienced this transition period and learned a lot. On oneself and on others.



ALL DIFFERENT

TIME FOR QUESTIONS AND LAUGHTER

It is true, puberty is a time when young girls are often dissatisfied with themselves and their bodies. We would like to be as confident as our best friend, to have our cousin's long legs and the mouth of this movie star who invades all the posters. We'd like to, we'd like to, we'd like to be... but what, by the way? To be like others while being special. But is it possible? You bet yes! By accepting you and learning to love yourself the way you are. In other words, accept yourself with your strengths and weaknesses, your body and your personality.

When you feel good about yourself, you also make a good impression on others. But loving yourself, precisely in this phase of transition to adulthood, is easier said than done.

Who am I? What do I want? Where does all this lead me? These questions are difficult to answer. To do that, you have to get to know and love yourself. Hard, hard, when feelings play the yo-yo, when the body obviously does what it wants. And often it is easier to know what you don't want, rather than what you want. All this is part of this period of turbulence, the questions, the ups and downs. It's up to you to discover what you like, what's important to you, where your limits are – and where the limits of others are. A book or a discussion with your mother, a girlfriend or a boyfriend can help you to understand yourself better and perhaps also to laugh at yourself.



MY BODY

Many changes occur at puberty. If you know what's going on and you know how to put names to all this, you feel more confident.

A distinction is made between internal and external genitalia. The internal organs are: the vagina, uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries. External: the labia majora and labia minora and the clitoris.

THE VAGINA

The vagina serves as a link between the external and internal genitalia. It is a highly extensible muscle tube, with a mucosal lining on the inner wall. At one end is the entrance to the vagina, at the other end is the cervix, in other words the passage to the uterus. The front part of the vagina has many nerve cells, making it very sensitive. When a woman has sex with a man, her vagina receives the penis.

THE LIPS OF THE VULVA

The large, thick lips conceal two softer skin folds, the labia minora. If they are spread open the entrance to the vagina, the urinary meatus and a small "pimple", the clitoris, can be seen.

THE CLITORIS

The clitoris is a very sensitive sexual organ. As it has many nerve cells, it reacts very strongly to the stimulus; touching or stroking it can trigger very vivid pleasure. When not excited, the clitoris is covered with a fold of skin.

UTERUS

The uterus is a highly extensible muscle that surrounds a "cavity". It looks like a pear sitting upside down. The inside is lined with the uterine mucosa. Every month, it prepares for a possible pregnancy; in other words, it is better irrigated by blood and thickens. When a woman is pregnant, a fertilized egg has nested in it, and the child can grow in the womb. If no fertilized eggs are set, menstruation is triggered every month. The uterus then removes the upper layer of the mucous membrane that had formed and was not used and the unfertilized egg. Except in a few rare cases, menstrual bleeding is a sign that the woman is not pregnant.

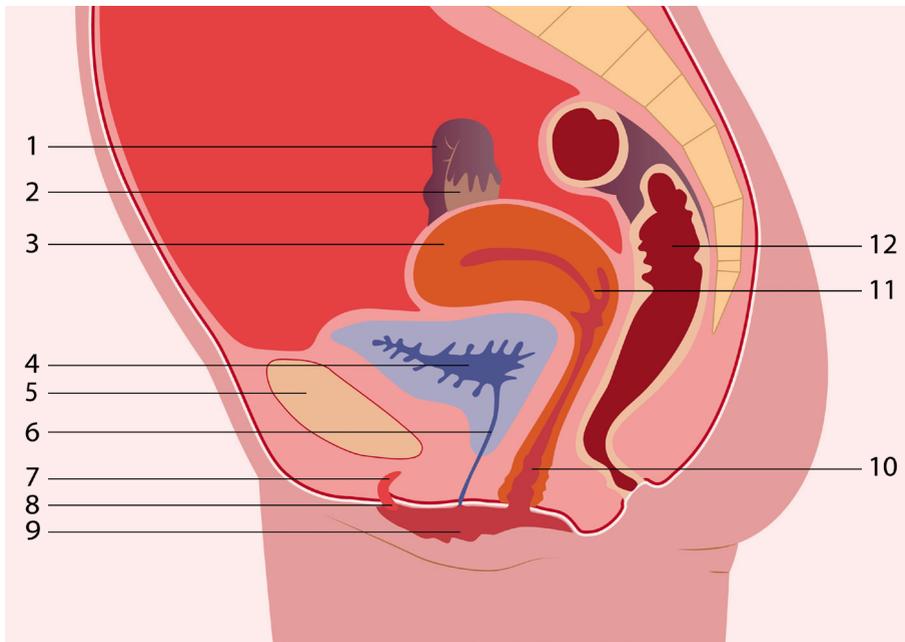
THE HYMEN (VIRGINITY)

The hymen is located near the entrance of the vagina. It is not a sexual organ per se, but it is important for many people who make it a symbol of virginity. It is a thin, stretchy membrane whose appearance varies from one girl to another. Some girls do not have a hymen. In a few cases, it is completely closed. In most young girls, however, the hymen is a collar around the opening of the vagina; it is through this opening that menstrual blood can flow. If the collar is narrow, the hymen can tear during the first sexual intercourse (defloration), sometimes causing slight bleeding; but this is only the case in half of women.

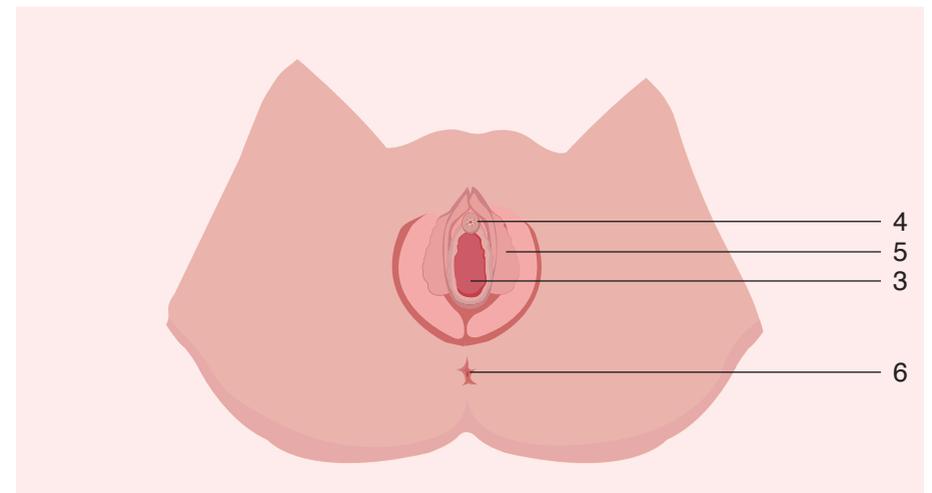
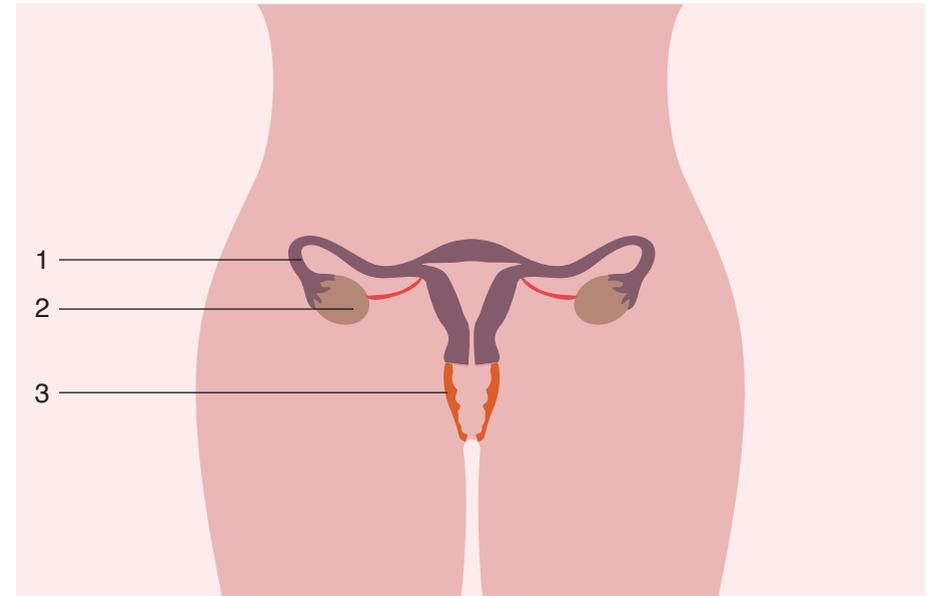
THE BREASTS

The breasts are composed of adipose (fat) and glandular tissue. At puberty, the breasts and nipples begin to grow. The shapes of the breasts are very variable. The colour of the nipples and areola ranges from very light to very dark. Breasts have a biological function: to produce milk for infants. Like the clitoris, breasts and nipples are among the most sensitive areas of the female body.

GENITAL ORGANS: WHAT THEY ARE CALLED AND WHERE THEY ARE LOCATED



- | | |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. fallopian tube | 7. erectile tissue of clitoris |
| 2. ovary | 8. clitoris |
| 3. uterus (womb) | 9. inner and outer lips of vulva |
| 4. bladder | 10. vagina |
| 5. pubic bone | 11. cervix |
| 6. urethra | 12. rectum |



- | |
|----------------------------------|
| 1. fallopian tube |
| 2. ovary |
| 3. vagina |
| 4. clitoris |
| 5. inner and outer lips of vulva |
| 6. anus |

SELF-ESTEEM, WHERE DO YOU BUY IT?

What exactly is self-esteem?

To value oneself is to know who one is and to be aware of one's worth. And this feeling can vary. The good thing is that you learn this every day. Self-esteem is the feeling you get when you have achieved something. So you feel strong. Everyone has skills that they can use, whether in school, in sport, in an artistic field, in relationships with others or with animals. And then there are other areas where we may not be doing as well. It doesn't matter. No one can do everything right. Becoming aware of it can be destabilizing, but also stimulating. You have to realize one thing: the better you know yourself and the better you know what you want, the more confident you get. And the more your self-esteem grows.

TIP

If one day you feel like you are just no one, write on a sheet of paper what you can do and like to do. Do it if you want with your best girlfriend, your mother, your father or someone you think is cool. You will see that you are capable of many things. You can and have the right to love your body too. Often, what is special is what not everyone has. Maybe right now that's precisely what's causing you a problem and you'd rather be different. Don't be too hard on yourself; not everyone judges beauty in the same way. And your body is changing a lot. So, patience...

Even at puberty, not every day is detestable. Many times you surf the top of the wave, you are fine, you think you are beautiful, you don't doubt anything. Enjoy this feeling and try to remember it when things go wrong.

SELF-DETERMINATION

Self-determination is an important concept that means that everyone can freely realize their ideas and desires without pressure. As long as it does not harm others. With each passing day, you grow up and you can decide a little more yourself. Because puberty is also the time when you gradually detach yourself from your parents or people who are important to you, when you finish compulsory school and when you embark on new paths. And you decide where these paths will lead you. But it also means that you take more and more responsibility for your actions.



MENSTRUATION, MENSTRUATION, CYCLE

Having your period means menstruation. This word comes from Latin and means «what comes back every month». This refers to the flow of blood that returns approximately every 28 to 32 days from puberty. It is only at menopause – in most women between the ages of 45 and 55 – that menstruation stops. From that moment on, the body no longer prepares itself each month for a possible pregnancy. The first periods are called menarche. From that moment on, from a biological point of view, you are no longer a child, but a woman who can have children.

Before the first period, the vagina secretes a white mucus called white discharge. White discharge, which girls notice in their underwear or on toilet paper, are a sign that the first period is about to begin. But sometimes, however, it still takes a long time. After the first period, it can last months, sometimes two years, until the menstrual cycle is regular. From then on, an egg matures about every four weeks. If this egg is fertilized by a man's sperm in the fallopian tube, it can nestle in the uterus and develop there to become a child. If it is not fertilized, the egg dies. The upper layer of the uterus and a little blood (50 to 100 millilitres) are expelled from the vagina: this is the onset of menstruation.

SANITARY NAPKINS/PADS

To absorb the blood of menstruation, girls and women use sanitary napkins, which, are glued in the underwear. After use they should be discarded in the garbage.

Because disposable pads are too expensive, recyclable ones can also be used. There you take a clean cotton square cloth, fold it long to put it in your pants, or find pads made by a small local company



Important: Change the pads frequently (4–6 times in 24 hours!), wash them in cold water and dry them in the sun! This is the best protection against genital infections

FERTILE DAYS AND – NON-FERTILE DAYS

During a cycle, women have fertile days and others that are not. This depends on the action of different hormones: estrogens, progesterone, follicle stimulating hormone and luteinizing hormone. It is not easy to calculate which days are fertile. What is decisive is the time of ovulation. A sperm can wait up to 7 days for the egg in the woman's body. In other words, even sexual intercourse that takes place several days before ovulation can lead to pregnancy. After ovulation, the egg remains fertilizable for about 24 hours.

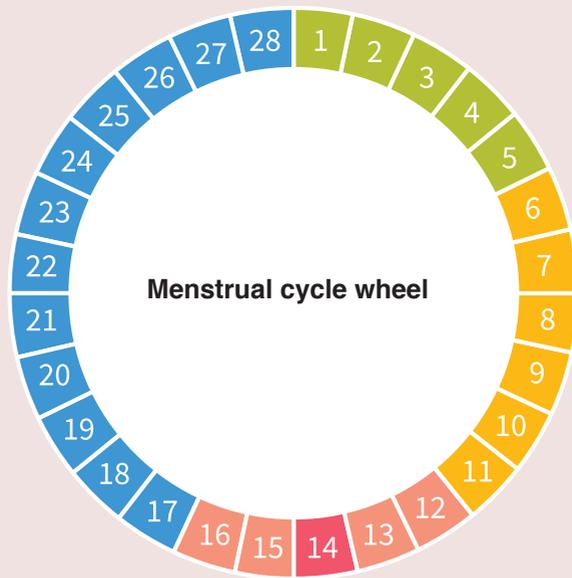
Since the length of the cycle is not always the same and factors such as stress, illness, diet, travel, etc., can influence the cycle, it is difficult to determine exactly which days are fertile and which are not.

THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE

The interval between the first day of the period and the last day before the next period is called a «cycle». In general, a cycle is 28 days long. But there are shorter or longer cycles, it varies from one woman to another. The cycle is divided in two: the first phase goes from the first day of menstruation to ovulation and lasts on average 14 days. Ovulation is the time when the egg is released from one of the two ovaries and goes down into the tube. There, it can be fertilized (within 24 hours) by a spermatozoon. The second phase, also on average 14 days, begins after ovulation and ends on the last day before the next period. Many people consider menstruation as something bad, dirty, or pay no attention to it. But in other cultures, the first periods are a time for a celebration

Method giving information about fertile days:

Keep a menstrual cycle calendar. This requires a lot of discipline.



- luteal phase, non-fertile day
- follicular phase, probably infertile days
- ovulation; fertile days

PAIN

Some young girls have different problems before and during the first days of menstruation. This can be irritability, cravings, breast tension, headaches, mood swings or stomach aches. Why some women suffer from these disorders and others not, the reason is not very clear. Hormones probably play an important role.

PERIODS AND SPORT

If you want to and feel good, you can easily play sports when you have your period.

TIP:

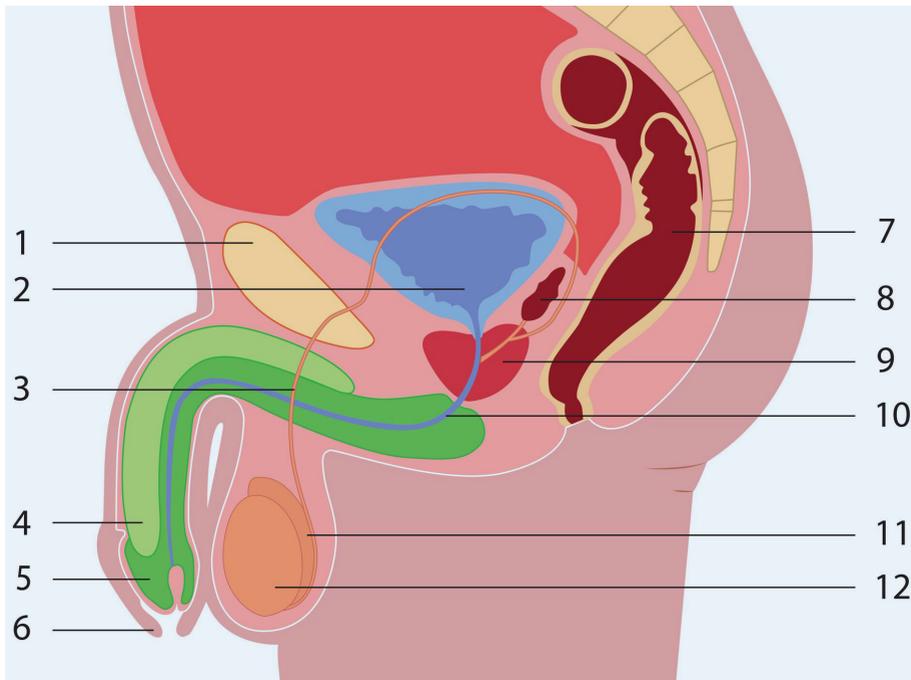
Some herbal teas reduce the disorders. A low-fat diet, sports, massage or relaxation exercises can help. In the event of more serious disorders, the doctor may prescribe a medication.



HEY THE GARS!

Tip: Boys aren't always as cool as they look either. Many of them are shy and some hide their feelings because they prefer to appear strong and confident. They also have their models. In groups, they generally do not behave in the same way as alone with a girl. Just like the girls, by the way. Boys want us to take them seriously and share their interests. They are different, and that's why they're so attractive.

MALE GENITAL ORGANS



- | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. pubic bone | 7. rectum |
| 2. bladder | 8. seminal vesicle |
| 3. vas deferens | 9. prostate gland |
| 4. erectile tissue of penis | 10. urethra |
| 5. glans of penis | 11. epididymis |
| 6. foreskin | 12. testicle |



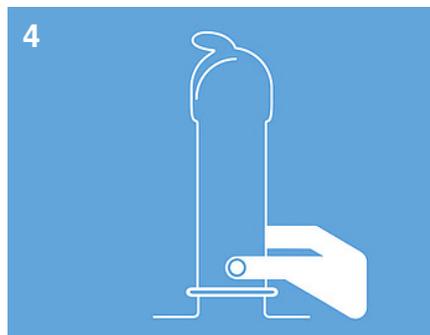
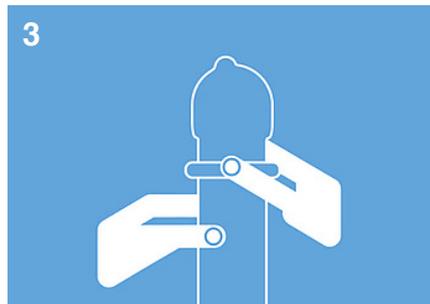
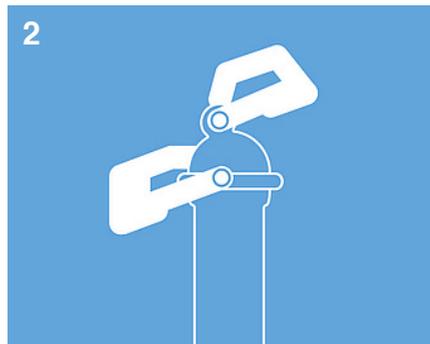
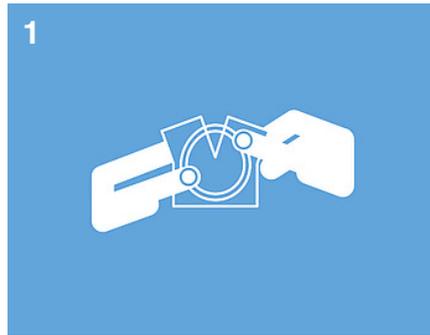
When a boy is sexually aroused, his blood circuit brings a lot of blood into his penis. This one hardens and stands up. It is only when his sex is erect that he can introduce it into a woman's vagina.

Boys reach puberty about two years after girls. There is a lot going on with them too. The main male sex hormone is called testosterone and is produced primarily in the testicles. It is what allows the production of sperm. It also influences sexual drive, body and hair growth, muscle development, voice, skin thickness. At this stage, the boys are moulting, the mustache starts growing and they have their first ejaculation. Boys turn into men. As in girls, sex hormones also contribute to changes in the whole person, including behaviour. Young lads look for friends, travel the world in groups, measure their strengths and begin to take an interest in girls.

A BARRIER METHOD: THE CONDOM

The condom is an important contraceptive. First, it can be used by the (young) man and it effectively protects against pregnancy if used correctly. Second, it protects against HIV infection, the virus that can trigger AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. Most young people and adults who have sex with each other for the first time and until they have done HIV-tests use a condom.

The condom is a thin latex skin that prevents direct contact between the penis and vagina. At its end is a reservoir that collects sperm after ejaculation. The condom is one of the barrier methods, which means that a barrier (the condom) prevents sperm from entering the vagina.



COMMUNICABLE INFECTIONS

WHAT IS HIV? WHAT IS AIDS?

The word AIDS is the acronym for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. AIDS is not one, but several diseases. AIDS is the result of infection with the HIV virus (pathogen). HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. An HIV infection cannot be cured and there is no vaccine to protect against it. Over a long, very long period of time, HIV gradually destroys the immune system.

HIV TRANSMISSION ROUTES

This virus can be transmitted during sexual intercourse. This is the case if the semen, blood or vaginal secretions of a person with HIV enter another person's bloodstream. Anyone who has caught the virus once keeps it in their blood forever. Currently, people living with HIV can receive medical treatment.

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS

Sexually transmitted infections are diseases like any other. Most are relatively easy to treat. It can become dangerous if an infection is not treated or if you are ashamed and do not talk about it.

Sexually transmitted infections that are not treated can have serious consequences, ranging from severe itching to cervical cancer, liver disease and infertility. Condoms are the best way to protect yourself from sexually transmitted infections.

VIOLENCE, HARASSMENT, ABUSE

Sexual violence is linked to domination and power. Sexual and physical violence against women is an expression of a power relationship between men and women. But it also reflects an image of the «virility» that is still very widespread in our society. For a girl or woman, the impact of sexual violence is humiliating and hurts her image and self-esteem. Body and soul are suffering, often for years.

RAPE

Rape is a forced penetration with an object, finger or penis into the vagina, anus or mouth. Most victims know their attacker. Only about 20% of the authors are unknown. If you have been raped or attempted raped, it is essential to contact a support and counselling centre. There, you will get help, the potential risk of pregnancy and HIV/AIDS will be assessed and you will be told what you can do. If you wish to file a complaint with the police, one will support you in your efforts. Often, a lot of time passes until one can talk about what happened. Even if it's been some time, you'll get help and support.



BODY CARE

Sweating, small pimples and oily hair can make life difficult at this stage of adulthood. You feel bad about yourself, you think you're ugly, you don't want to go out. But that's no reason to despair. Proper nutrition and body care can improve many things.

PIMPLES AND ACNE

At puberty, the body produces more and more sex hormones. These encourage the sebaceous glands to overproduce sebum (grease). The result: small pimples, also called blackheads.. These small vesicles filled with pus turn red and can cause pain: it's acne. Do not pierce them, otherwise the bacteria penetrate even deeper into the skin and the inflammation spreads. Some young girls suffer enormously from these unsightly impurities, others almost none.

Tip if you have buttons:

- Cleanse your face every day with water.
- Do not use greasy creams.
- Always use clean cloths.
- The sun (maximum half an hour a day) and fresh daily air can help to cleanse the skin.

TRANSPIRATION

Not all body odours are unpleasant by any means. But feeling sweat, for example after sports or after a very physical job, is not good. For intimate hygiene, the cheapest way is also the most appropriate: water.

Knowing the facts about your menstrual cycle makes you confident about entering womanhood.