Precocious (Early) Puberty in Boys

Puberty (PYOO bur tee) is the time when boys’ bodies and minds mature and they grow into young men. This usually starts when a boy is about 12 years old. Sometimes, though, a much younger boy starts to show the signs of puberty. This is called precocious (pre KOH shuss), or early, puberty. These early signs of puberty can be hard for your child.

Precocious puberty in boys

In boys, some of the signs of precocious puberty are:

- Growth of the testicles
- Growth of pubic, underarm or facial hair
- Voice deepening
- “Adult” body odor
- Growth of the penis
- Rapid height growth - a growth "spurt"
- Acne
- Acne
- "Adult" body odor

Talk to your doctor if your son is less than 9 years of age and shows any of these signs.

Causes of precocious puberty

The start of puberty is caused by the hypothalamus (the part of the brain that controls the pituitary gland). It tells the pituitary gland (a pea-sized gland near the base of the brain) to release hormones (Picture 1). These hormones stimulate a boy’s testicles to make sex hormones.

Sometimes a problem in the brain, such as injury, a tumor or an infection causes early puberty. A problem in the thyroid gland could also start puberty early.

Some boys can have growth of pubic or underarm hair but no other signs of sexual development such as a “growth spurt”. Children with some but not all signs of puberty may need to be seen by a doctor.
How it affects the child

When puberty is finished, a boy will stop growing. Children with early puberty that is not treated sometimes do not reach their full adult height. Even though they may have an early growth spurt that makes them taller than other children their age, finishing puberty early makes their bones stop growing.

Early puberty can be hard for your child to deal with emotionally and socially. Boys may be more aggressive and develop a sex drive that does not match their age. The hardest part may be the teasing that these children sometimes face from others.

Diagnosis

Your child's doctor may order blood tests to check hormone levels. X-rays of your child's hand may be done to see if the bones are growing too fast. Other tests to help rule out specific causes may include: CT scans (see Helping Hand HH-III-199, *CT Scan*), MRIs (see Helping Hand HH-III-69, *MRI Magnetic Resonance Imaging*) and ultrasounds (see Helping Hand HH-III-64, *Ultrasound*).

Treatment

Children with precocious puberty can be treated. Doctors can help your child to grow to reach his full adult height and help stop the emotional and social problems he may face from maturing early.

If his doctor thinks your son has precocious puberty, he may be sent to a pediatric endocrinologist (a doctor who specializes in growth and hormonal disorders in children). Depending upon the cause, treatment may include:

- Treating the underlying cause or disease
- Using medicines to lower the levels of hormones and delay sexual development

Sometimes no treatment is needed.

Caring for your child

Give your child a simple, truthful explanation about what is happening. Explain that these changes are normal for older children and teens, but that his body has started developing a little too early. Try not to focus on your child's appearance. Instead, offer praise for achievements in school, sports and other activities. Watch for signs that teasing or other problems may be affecting your child. Warning signs to watch for and talk to his doctor about include:

- Poor grades, problems at school
- Depression
- Loss of interest in daily activities