Beyond a Growth Spurt and Deodorant: How puberty impacts the health of youth (and what do sex and gender have to do with it?)

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Defining Adolescence

When does it start?
When does it end?
Defining Adolescence

“...A period of the life course between the time puberty begins and the time adult status is approached, when young people are prepared to take on the roles and responsibilities of adulthood in their culture.”

(Amett, 2007)
Defining Puberty

- What are one or two of the things that you remember most about going through puberty?

- Take a few minutes to contemplate this and jot down some notes. Share only if you are comfortable doing so.
Defining Puberty

- A suite of biological changes, regulated by hormones and the endocrine system, that marks the beginning of adolescence and eventuates in adult-like anatomy, physiology, and physical appearance.

- Puberty is a long-term, gradual process that begins at conception and ends with the capacity for sexual reproduction.
What Happens During Puberty?

- Come up with a list of biological changes that happen during puberty
  - Females
  - Males
Five Physical Changes of Puberty

1. Development of secondary sex characteristics leading to adult-like appearance
2. The growth spurt – a rapid acceleration in height and weight
3. Changes in body fat and muscle
4. Changes in heart and lungs leading to greater strength and endurance
5. Development/maturation of primary sex characteristics necessary for reproduction
One of the first signs of puberty in both females and males is the growth spurt - high rate of growth in height:

- Females = 3.5 inches during peak, between ages 11-13
- Males = 4.1 inches during peak, between ages 13-15
Sex Differences in Muscle and Fat

- For females, body fat increases faster
- For males, muscle tissue increases faster
- Generally, males become stronger while females become more flexible after puberty
Triggers for Puberty

- Puberty is nature’s way of getting child rearing started
- It doesn’t take cultural norms into account
- Age of puberty has been getting younger
  - Gender differences
  - Racial differences
Triggers for Puberty

- What are some influences on pubertal timing?
  - Race/Ethnicity
  - Breastfeeding
  - Exposure to smoking in utero
  - Nutritional deficiency
  - Illness
  - Excessive exercise
  - Excessive thinness
  - Stressful family environment
Puberty: Additional Factors

- In addition to all the biological changes, what else is happening:
  - Psychologically?
  - Socially?
Correlates of Early Pubertal Onset

Females
- Low self-esteem
- Poorer coping
- Less social support
- Higher parental conflict
- Lower scholastic achievement
- More suicide attempts
- Higher rates of internalizing disorders
- Obesity (CVD)

Males
- Higher goal setting
- Higher self-esteem
- Higher achievement
Correlates of Early Pubertal Onset

Male and female youth who enter puberty earlier than their peers are more likely to:

- Smoke
- Drink alcohol
- Have anti-social behavior
- Have higher rates of delinquency
- Begin sexual experimentation earlier
Perceptions of puberty

- Puberty is associated with changes in sexual expectations and roles
- Young people develop social meanings to their feelings of sexual arousal
The Impact of Gender

- **Differential Gender Socialization**
  - Socializing boys and girls according to different expectations
  - Creates an understanding of ‘appropriate’ behaviors for males and females
  - Happens directly and indirectly
  - Differential socialization most often results from how parents and other adult role models were socialized
  - Reflects a culture’s beliefs about gender
  - Parents and other adult role models may do this without even thinking consciously about what they are doing

One study found that 90% of all infants observed at an American shopping mall were wearing clothing that was gender specific in color or style.
Puberty and Sex/Gender Differentiation

- As adolescents become more capable of reflecting on gender roles, they become more concerned with compliance to gender norms for themselves and others.
- With adolescence and pubertal development (which represents sexual maturity biologically), adolescents are eager for information about whether potential mates will find them attractive – gender roles and schemas provide that information.
Persistence of Gender Differences

- Gender schemas tend to shape the way we notice, interpret, and remember information according to our expectations about genders.
- Social roles for males and females enhance or suppress different capabilities.
- Differential gender socialization leads males and females to develop different skills and attitudes which leads to different behaviors – the differences in behavior seem to confirm the appropriateness of the different roles in a Catch-22.
Gender Intensification Hypothesis

- With biological development (puberty), the cultural agenda “kicks in” with intensified gender socialization efforts to produce “mature males and females” and increased pressure of males and females to conform to gender role specific behavior.

- Culture gives meaning to what it is to be “good male” or “good female.” Young people look to media, peers, and adults to figure out, with their body changing due to puberty, how am I supposed to feel, think and act to fulfill my gender role in a particular context?
Pubertal timing and dating

- Research to date has only focused on heterosexual relationships/gender binary assumptions
- Focus on females
  - Because they mature sooner?
  - Because of poorer outcomes?
  - Societal preference to “control” female sexual activity?
Pubertal timing and dating

Early maturing females (taken as a whole)

- Place more emphasis on their own popularity and appearance in their associations with males
- Date sooner
- Have an earlier sexual debut
- Marry earlier
Dating and weight concerns

- Strong association between girls' interest in popularity with boys and their concern with appearance and weight
- Early dating is related to body image disturbance
- Younger adolescents place higher importance on a potential dating partner's superficial features (e.g., looks)
Puberty, Dating, Weight Concerns

- Spending time with, dating, and physical contact with boys predicted higher scores on an assessment of eating-disordered behavior in 12-13 year-old girls.

- The effect of heterosocial dating on eating disturbance is moderated by the experience of menarche; girls who dated and were early maturers were more likely to score higher on the EAT.
Dating Scripts

- Social scripts are socioculturally defined cognitive models, or schemas, that individuals use to organize their experiences in the social domain and to form expectations and evaluations pertaining to social interactions.

- According to Simon and Gagnon's (1986) sexual script theory, traditional gender roles for dating are typically acquired during childhood and adolescence.

- Adolescent girls can develop scripts about dating and sexuality before engaging in such activities.
Dating Scripts

Two types

- **Gendered**
  - Girls placed themselves in a passive role in their scripts; alluded to a sense of romance, to beauty, and to male dominance.

- **Non-gendered**
  - Dates were more casual (or non-existent). Emphasized fun and the activities associated with the date.
Gendered Dating Scripts

"I'd spend a long time doing my hair and picking out a dress. I'd shave my legs. I'd wait and be nervous. I'd ask him if he like my personality or just my looks."

“He'd just take me out to dinner... We would go for a walk on the beach afterwards... After we talked we would go swimming down in the water and then he would take me home and then kiss me goodnight.”
Non-Gendered Dating Scripts

"I'd probably go out to the movies ... or to the roller rink and go rollerblading or something. Just, you know, something fun."

**Girl:** "I'd probably go somewhere in the neighborhood, like a pizzeria.... Just casual, not really all tuxedo stuff."

**Interviewer:** "What would you talk about?"

**Girl:** "He would pick a subject or I would pick a subject like 'How was school today?' or 'What did you guys do in class?'"
### Dating Scripts and Weight Concerns

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<th>Non-Gendered</th>
<th>Gendered</th>
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<td>Lower</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Higher</td>
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Puberty and Sexual Health

- Do you think these findings are relevant today?
  - What has or hasn’t changed that makes you think this way?
- How does puberty and its timing impact a young woman’s sexual health
  - Biologically?
  - Psychologically?
  - Socially?