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Early puberty on the rise among girls

by Victoria Bekiempis, Chronicle Contributor

Girls are hitting puberty earlier than in the past, and this shift could have damaging individual and public health effects, according to a study recently released in the journal Pediatrics.

What the August report found: Girls are becoming women sooner. Over the past 20 years, their bodies are maturing earlier, growing breasts and sometimes developing periods at younger ages than previously. The study looked at breast development as an indicator of puberty. Meanwhile, their young ages means that these girls are still kids at the psychological and social levels — their bodies are "ahead of their brains" as one Queens parent advocate put it.

It makes sense, then, that precocious puberty, as it is more formally called, also brings with it a host of serious potential health dangers, Dr. Maida Galvez, study contributor and educator at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine and Dr. Chhaya Chakrabarti, attending pediatrician at New York Hospital Queens, told the Queens Chronicle.

Girls who hit puberty earlier are at greater risk for teenage pregnancy and breast cancer later in life, among other health problems, Galvez warns.

These women are more likely to have low self esteem, sexually transmitted infections, short stature and premature bone maturation. Girls who hit puberty earlier might be resistent to insulin, too, and at higher risk for cardiovascular disease, Galvez said.



A new study says girls are physically developing much faster than they were just 20 years ago, leading to both physical and mental health concerns.

What's particularly striking: the relationship between puberty onset and breast cancer risk. For every year that puberty is delayed, risk of breast cancer shrinks 9 percent among pre-menopausal women and 4 percent of post-menopausal women.

Also, the likelihood of early puberty is higher among minorities, Galvez said. At age 7, 10.4 percent of white girls have developmental characteristics indicative of early puberty. Compare that to 14.9 percent of Hispanics and 23.4 percent of non-Hispanic blacks.

At age 8, the disparity is even more staggering. Around 18.3 percent of white girls show signs of early puberty, whereas 42.9 percent of black girls and 30.9 percent of Hispanic girls demonstrate breast development at that age.

ýhe study surveyed 1,239 girls in East Harlem, the greater Cincinnati metropolitan area and California's San Francisco Bay area. Findings emphasize the racial discrepancy – while white girls' puberty onset seems to be steadier, black girls continue to hit a main bellwether of puberty, breast development, at younger and younger ages.

Early breast development, however, isn't a guarantee that a girl will have health problems later in life, Chakrabarti said.

There are some instances where white girls can develop breasts at age 7 and black and Hispanic girls at age 6, and it is perfectly normal, Chakrabarti said.

Varition exists among populations, she said, and it only makes sense that there are perfectly healthy girls who mature at the higher and lower ends of the spectrum.

Still, Chakrabarti said, girls or parents who are concerned that they're hitting puberty too early should visit the doctor. This way, he or she can rule out any other health problems, like brain lesions, which could cause early puberty.

And, Chakrabarti said, problematic early puberty symptoms can be treated with hormones. If their periods are delayed, she said, girls likely to hit puberty early have more time to grow to adequate, healthy heights.

What's unclear is the specific cause of this trend. Charkrabarti said that there's speculation that exposure to certain environmental factors might prompt early development.

Chemicals in creams, lotions and other cosmetics might alter hormone release and absorption, especially estrogen, Chakrabarti said.

Also, hormones in foods could alter the onset of puberty. Experts, however, have not pinpointed a particular foodstuff, such as hormones in chicken or excess soy consumption. Soy contains high levels of estrogen compared to other foods.

Instances of early puberty, Chakrabarti said, need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis even if general causes are identified.

Family histories of early puberty, then, should be ruled out so that public health specialists can identify possible contaminants and act accordingly.

Leni Calas, editor and publisher of area parenting website Queens Mamas, said she has heard of young girls hitting puberty earlier. The Astoria resident's main concern is

the psychological readiness for growing up fast. Not only can early puberty be traumatizing, she said, but it can put young women in danger of predators. They feel older than they act, and older men might pay inappropriate attention to them because of how they look, she said.

"Emotionally it affects them, I think, because they're not really ready to become women, and their bodies are sort of ahead of their brains," she said.

"Because girls are hitting puberty earlier, their bodies are changing earlier, they're looking older."

Max, Callas' 11 year-old daughter, said she did not directly know anyone who hit puberty earlier than normal. One girl she had heard about, though, got her period early and was a "brat" about it, bragging to her friends.

Still, the Callases are ready, and their preparations serve as possible models to parents, whether or not they're dealing with early puberty.

Callas suggests that parents purchase their daughters a book released by the American Girl doll, toy and magazine company. That book, "The Care & Keeping of You: The Body Book for Girls" is a simple-to-read approach to sex education, Callas said.

Another tip Callas shared: Pack your daughters a period pouch that they can keep in their school backpacks. Period pouches, which are as simple as baggies with maxi pads and a change of underwear, are a quick and convenient way to make sure that your daughter isn't caught off guard when she gets her first period.

Also, dotgirlproducts.com has a pre-packed period kit with pads and an easy-to-read booklet on periods.

The key, Callas said, is making your daughter feel comfortable regardless of when she hits whatever stage of puberty.

"Do something special so that she can feel like she doesn't have to hide it," Callas said. "It's not something that she has to be embarassed about."





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