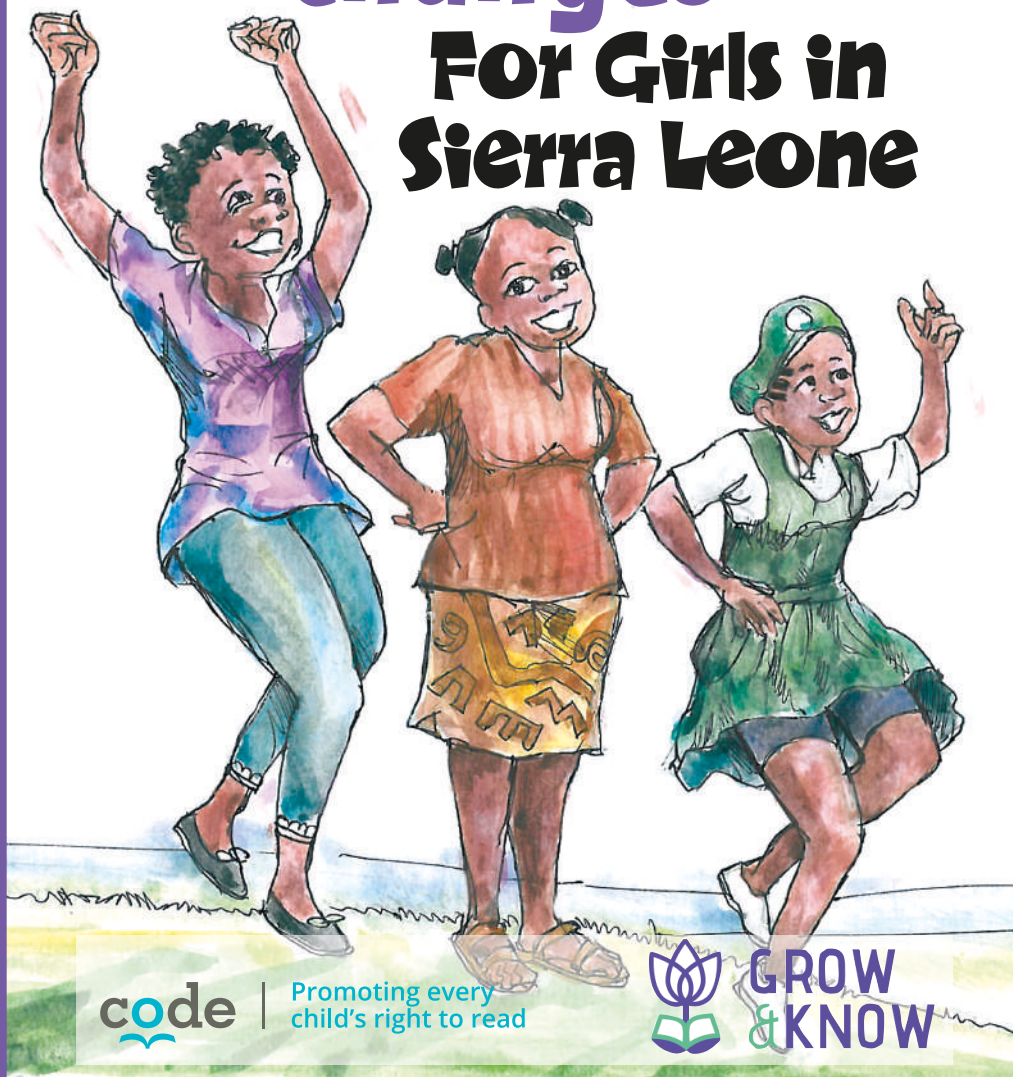


Growth and Changes

For Girls in Sierra Leone



code

Promoting every
child's right to read



GROW
& KNOW

Growth and Changes

For Girls in Sierra Leone

Text written by: Marni Sommer, Grow & Know
Personal stories: Girls from Sierra Leone

Illustrations by:
Leslie Lumeh

Canada 

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Vocabulary List

These are words that readers may find unfamiliar. Be prepared to assist youth to learn these words and to understand the meaning. These words and the associated concepts are explained in detail in the book.

Adolescence: the time after the onset of puberty when a child becomes an adult, between 10 and 19 years old.

Contract: when a muscle becomes shorter and tighter. The muscles in the uterus contract, causing cramps when menstruating.

Erection: when the internal tissue of the penis fills with blood to cause the penis to grow larger and harder.

Ejaculate: to release semen from the body through the penis.

Hormones: chemical substances that help control how cells and organs do their work.

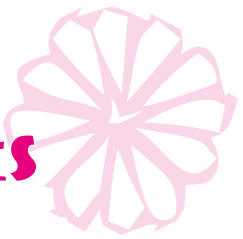
Menstruation: also known as “having a period”. When the lining of the uterus and blood comes out through a girl’s vagina.

Pre-menstrual Syndrome: the changes in the level of hormones in a girl’s body before having a period that can result in physical pain or changes in mood.

Puberty the time when a child’s body begins to develop into a young adult, usually between 9 and 14 years old.

Semen: sticky, milky-white fluid that comes out of the penis when a boy ejaculates. The semen contains sperm.

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WHAT IS PUBERTY?

Between the ages of 9 and 14, most girls and boys begin to notice changes in their bodies. These physical and emotional changes take place over a number of years.

These changes are called **puberty** or **adolescence**, and girls and boys at this age are often called **adolescents**.



Puberty starts when extra amounts of chemicals called **hormones** begin to be produced in the body. These hormones lead to changes in the body. In addition to causing physical changes, the hormones cause emotional changes. So, a growing girl may feel happy one moment, or angry, sad, or confused the next moment.



Puberty is the time when **girls' bodies begin to release eggs** and **boys' bodies begin to produce sperm**. It is the time when we develop into young women and men. It is a special time. It is our bodies' way of maturing so that one day we can have children and start our own families. Even though girls' bodies start having the ability to have children, this does not mean that girls are ready to have children.

When does puberty begin and how long does it take?

Changes take place in girls and boys at different times. Generally, changes start earlier for girls than for boys. Some start before the age of 10, while others start after the age of 14. For some girls, changes may take place within a year or less. For other girls, the changes can take place over 6 years.

What are the physical changes that take place in girls?

The physical changes that take place for girls include: Her breasts start to grow. Her hips get broader. Hair starts to grow in her armpits and around her vagina. And she starts to menstruate—or **have her periods**.



Show Each Other Respect

Girls and boys should be understanding and not tease each other during puberty. During this time, your bodies and emotions are changing a lot. Sometimes, girls can feel pain from their menstruation. Boys can feel shy because of erections and ejaculations. Some girls and boys bodies change faster or slower than others. These are all normal feelings and experiences.



Puberty can be a confusing time, so it is important that you be kind and treat each other with respect. Do not shame others for the changes taking place in their bodies during this time of growth.

Adults may also start to treat you differently and expect you to be more responsible. So, treat each other like brothers and sisters, and offer help and support in chores, in education, or in sport activities.

WHAT IS MENSTRUATION?

Menstruation is when the lining of the uterus, which includes blood, comes out through the vagina. Bleeding usually lasts 3 to 7 days. It usually happens every month. Menstruation means that your body is growing and getting ready for the future, when you might get pregnant and have a baby. Monthly bleeding is not something to be scared of. It is perfectly normal.

Most girls have their first period **between the ages of 11 and 14**. Some girls start as early as the age of 8 and some girls start at the age of 17 or older.

The time from the first day of your period (when the bleeding starts) until the first day of your next period is usually 28 days (one month).

The time between periods can range from 21 to 35 days, depending on the girl.

During the first few years after you start your period, you may not menstruate every month. This is also perfectly normal.

Talk to a trusted adult if you have questions.



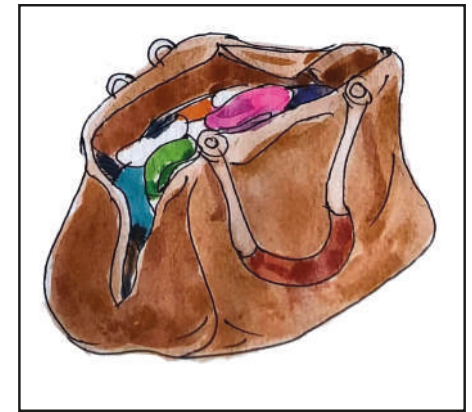
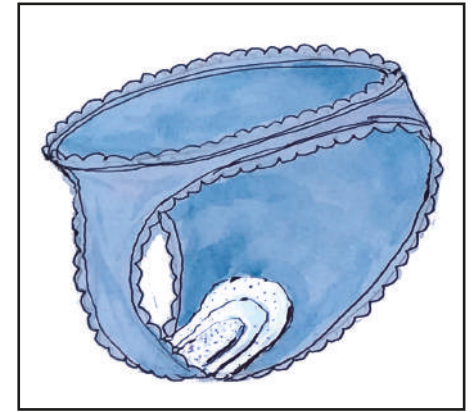
When you have your period, you should wash at least twice a day with soap and water in the area around (but not inside) the vagina. You can put clean cloths or menstrual pads on the inside of your underwear to absorb the blood. You should change these every 2 to 4 hours.

If you are going to school, take extra cloths or menstrual pads wrapped in a clean cloth or paper, so that you can change every few hours.

Dispose of used pads in pit latrines or take the cloth with you to wash for later use.

If you leak on your uniform in school, you can tie a shirt or a wrapper around your waist.

Or you can ask a friend or teacher to help.



Do girls have pains during their periods?

Some girls do not feel pain when they have their period, but many girls have small pains in their lower stomach area or back. Some girls have a lot of pain and may need medical advice. But usually, the pain is light and does not last long. These pains are called **cramps** because they are caused when the muscles of the uterus contract. It is these contractions that push out the lining of the uterus each month during menstruation.



Menstruation means a girl is biologically able to have a baby, but girls are not advised to have a baby until they are over 18 years old. This is because other changes in her body are still taking place.

Having a baby before a girl's body is finished growing can cause many health problems for the girl and her baby.

If a girl, who has her period every month, **misses a period** and if she has had sex with a boy or a man, it may mean that she is pregnant. Using methods of birth control can prevent pregnancy.

Girls can also miss periods if they are feeling stress, if they lose a lot of weight, if they don't eat well, or if they have been travelling a long distance.

What is PMS?

PMS is short for **Pre-Menstrual Syndrome**. PMS is the changes in the level of hormones in a girl's body that can affect her moods. Not all girls get this, but many do for a few days before they start their periods. Some girls may feel sad. Others may feel irritable and get angry faster than usual.



Some girls' breasts may get swollen and feel sore. This is all normal and natural and should not worry you.

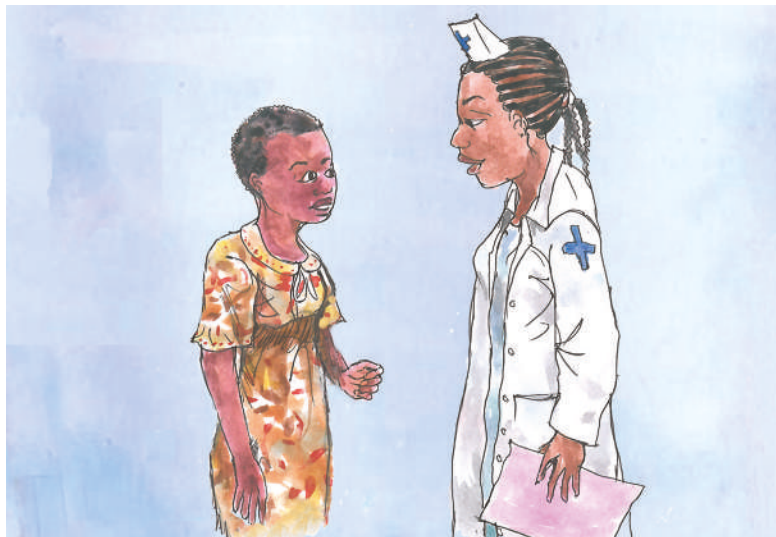
When you have your period some discomfort is normal, but if you have too much pain you may need medication. Talk to a parent or trusted adult for help.



WHO CAN YOU TALK TO?

When you have your period, you may need to change your cloth or menstrual pad 3 or 4 times a day. If you need to change it more often, you may be bleeding too much. In that case, talk to an older woman, a trusted adult, or a health care worker for advice.

If someone makes comments about your changing body that make you feel unsafe or uncomfortable, talk to someone you trust.



When you have questions about your changing body, you can **talk to your sisters, aunts, mothers, grandmothers, a trusted teacher or family member, or community health care worker.** It is important that you seek out and find someone that you trust for advice.





GIRLS IN SIERRA LEONE SHARE THEIR STORIES

These are real stories from girls in Sierra Leone who have recently experienced puberty and peer pressure. They wrote down their stories and their advice, so you know you are not alone on your journey to becoming a young woman.



Story 1

One day I was going to the farm with my mother, and **I saw some blood under my private parts**. I was so afraid to tell my mother. I kept it a secret as I thought that she would be embarrassed by me.

After two days, I finally told my mother and she taught me how to care for myself. She told me to use a clean and soft cotton wrapper, which I used after I took my bath by putting it under my private area. I was 11 years of age and I felt very bad because I was not expecting that to happen to me.

After I told my mother, I also told my friend. My friend gave me some advice about how to care for myself. And she gave me a menstrual pad, which she taught me to use.



My mother also told me to take a bath and change my pad twice a day when I am on my period. This is how I managed the experience.

My advice to the young ones is tell your mothers or friends when you start menstruating so that they can advise you on how to take care of yourself. They might give you a pad and teach you how to use it.

Story 2

Once upon a time while I was taking a class for my Basic Education Certificate Exam (BECE), I started feeling wet. I was confused so I waited for the class to end. After the class, I went home and got the bathroom key.

In the bathroom, after taking off my clothes, **I saw blood on my underwear.** I was 13



years old and I did not know what to do since it was my first time to see blood. I was disturbed and started to cry.

Then I went to my elder sister and told her what I had seen. She advised me to take a bath. After bathing, I got some clean underwear. I saw my sister holding a piece of soft cloth that she had folded.



She placed it in the middle of my underwear. After putting on the underwear with the cloth, I started to feel good.

My advice to young girls who are about to start their period is tell someone like your mother, sister, aunt, friend, or anyone who has gone through that experience. You can learn from them. I am advising you not to keep it to yourself, because you will not get the guidance that you are supposed to have.

Story 3

I was 14 years old when **I start seeing my menstruation**. At that time, I was in the garden and I felt pain in my stomach. I thought it was just an ordinary pain.

Later, I felt like urinating and when I removed my pants, I saw blood on my private parts. I felt very bad and ran to my mother and told her that I have hurt myself and showed her my pants.

My mother laughed and said, “Let’s go home.”



At home she took me inside and told me that I was now a big girl and that I had reached puberty. My mama asked me to remove my pants. Then she gave me a clean pair of pants and placed a pad inside the pants. She dressed me up and applied a nice spray on me. She told me not to be afraid when I see my period.

My mother also told me, “You are a big girl, and you should take care of yourself whenever you see your period, like we did today.”

My advice is that you should not be afraid when you see your period, because it is the puberty stage. If you are at home, tell your mother but if you are in school, tell a teacher you trust and they will show you what to do and give you some advice.

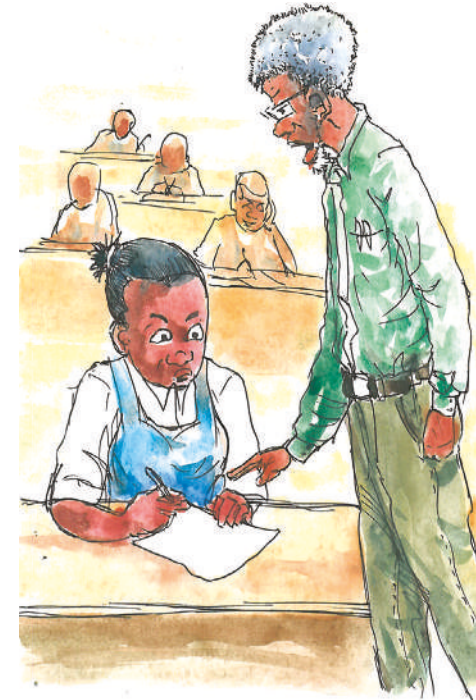


Story 4

One day, I was in school, and it was an exam period. I was 14 years old. I did not study for the exam and my friend, who always copies answers during exams in class, told me to join her. But I was afraid and refused. She continued to talk to me **to try to get me to join her** in spying. Because she was my friend, I joined her.

I felt embarrassed because as I was about to spy, I was caught by my teacher. He ordered me to stop! I was so ashamed.

My advice to my younger ones is to stop going out with bad friends.



Story 5

I cannot remember the exact age, but I was between 11 and 13 years old when I had **my first experience of peer pressure.**

I had a friend. She started using a phone at a young age. One day, she asked me if I had a phone. I said, “No I do not.” She asked why? I said, “Because my parents do not have money to buy me one. And that is why my parents send me to school so I can get educated and become successful.”

She told me the importance of having a phone and that with a mobile phone you can communicate with one person to another. I said, “Okay, that is a good thing.” I also asked her, how she got the phone? She told me she got it from her boyfriend and that I should do the same. That way I can have a normal life.



I wanted to agree at first, but I remembered my mom’s advice. If I pay attention to my studies, I will be educated and become somebody important in the future. Her advice rang in my ear, so I decided to say no.

So, the advice I have for my younger sisters and brothers is: If you have a bad friend, do not follow them into doing something wrong. And also, you should study hard, because your education will not deceive you.

Story 6

Once upon a time, when I was 12 years old, **I was influenced by my friends** to do something that I never wanted to do. They were engaged in smoking and drinking of alcohol. I was convinced by them to take part. I was caught the first time I tried smoking, but was lucky when I did it again.

The third time I tried it, I was caught by my mother. She held my hands and advised me not to do it again. I stopped doing these bad things.



I was frightened during my first experience of smoking and drinking. But my friends told me not to be afraid, so I listened to them, even though I was still scared. Later, I decided to end our friendship because I wanted to stop smoking and drinking.

My advice to young girls who are coming up is for them not to allow their friends to influence them to do bad things. If the friend is still doing bad things, they should stay away from that friend because they are a bad influence.

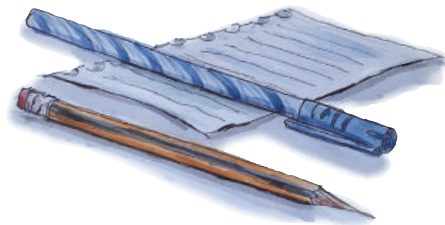
KEEPING TRACK OF YOUR PERIOD

To help you **keep track of your period**, here is an example of a calendar you can draw and use to help you plan.

When you get your period:

- Each time you get your period, **circle the date** it begins. Then **draw an X** through each day that the bleeding continues.
- Count 28 days** from the date you began your period to help you guess when you might start your next period again. The start of the next period can range from 21 to 35 days.

Remember, during puberty you can have irregular periods, so your starting days may change every month!



Month _____		Year _____				
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
	1	2	3	4	5	6
X	7	8	9	10	11	12
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

Month _____		Year _____				
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
			1	2	3	4
X	5	6	7	8	9	10
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

HOW TO...?



How to manage your first period?

Do not feel afraid! It can be scary to see the blood on your underwear, but it is normal and natural.

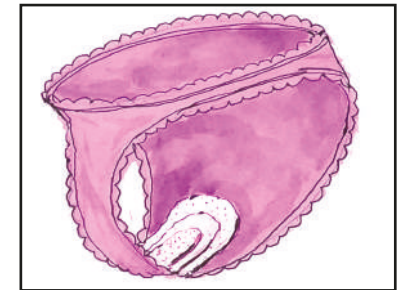
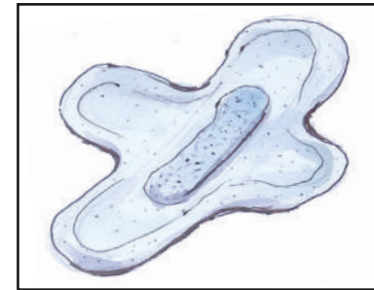
- Talk to your elders: your parents, sister, auntie, grandmother, female friends, or an older woman in your community. They will give you good advice.
- If you are at school, tell a female teacher or a fellow female student. They will help you.

- **Feel proud!**
Your body is developing into a young woman!



How to absorb the blood?

- Place a clean cloth or sanitary pad on the inside of your underwear. The sticky side of the pad goes on the underwear to keep it in place.
- Change the cloth or sanitary pad every 2 to 4 hours or when you think that it is getting too full of blood.



How to manage a pad made from cloth or cotton wool:

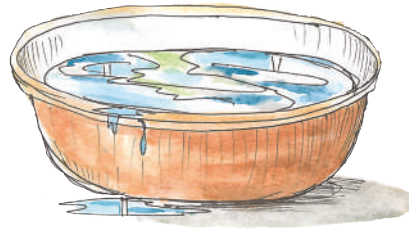


- ☉ Wrap the used cloth or cotton pad in paper, or put it in a bag and take it home.

- ☉ Soak all used cloths with salt and warm water.

OR

- ☉ Soak it in cold water and wash it with soap.



- ☉ Rinse it well with clean water to remove all the salt and soap.



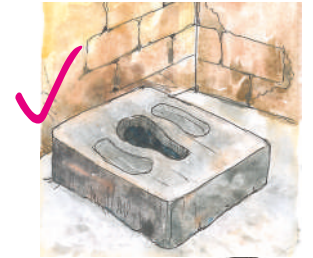
- ☉ Dry them well. Hang in the sun or use a hot iron
- ☉ Then pack them away in a clean, dry place for next month.

How to dispose of a menstrual pad bought from the shop:

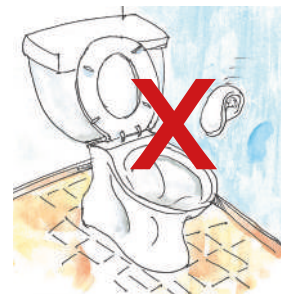
- ☉ Wrap the used pad in the wrapper it came in or wrap it in a in paper. Then throw it away.

When you throw it away:

- ☉ You **CAN** put it in a pit latrine.
- ☉ You **CAN** put it in a special bucket that has a lid, that are sometimes put in bathrooms for used pads.



- ☉ **DO NOT** put it on top of a waste area or in a bin where it can be seen.



- ☉ **DO NOT** put it in a flush toilet because it will cause the toilet to overflow.

How to keep yourself clean during your periods.

- ☉ Wash the area around (not inside) your vagina with soap and water every morning and evening.
- ☉ Keep unused cloths or cotton wool pads clean until you need them.
- ☉ Pat the area dry with a cloth and put a fresh cloth or sanitary pad inside your underwear.



How to manage the pain from your period.

- ☉ You can place a warm towel on your stomach area when you are resting.



- ☉ You can try to exercise and keep your body active.
- ☉ You can have a hot cup of tea or water to help you relax.



- ☉ You can take pain medicines every 4 to 6 hours on the most painful days.



IS IT NORMAL IF...?

Is it normal if I do not get my period every month?

Yes, when girls' bodies are developing, periods are often not regular and can skip months.

Is it normal if my period only lasts for 2 days?

Yes, every girl's period is different and will last different numbers of days as she is growing up.

Is it normal if I get my period for 3 days and my friend gets hers for 5 days?

Yes, the average length of a period is 5 days, but it can range from 2 to 7 days.

Is it normal if you get your period on a different day each month?

Yes, a typical menstrual cycle is 28 days but it can range between 21 and 35 days, depending on the girl.

Is it normal if a girl gets her period when she is young, such as ages 9, 10 or 11?

Yes, there is a range of ages when a girl can get her first period, from age 8 or 9 up until age 17 or 18.

Is it normal to get breast pains when you are growing up?

Yes, as a girl's body is developing, many changes are happening inside her body and small pains are natural.

Is it normal to get stomach pain during your period?

Yes, cramps are pains in the lower abdomen that may happen during or just before your period. Small or medium pain is normal, but if the pain is very bad, you might want to see a health care worker for advice.

Is it normal that boys do not get periods?

Yes, boys' bodies are different inside and they cannot have babies, so they do not menstruate.

Is it normal to feel shy when you have your period?

Yes, many girls feel shy, because they are learning how to manage their periods and their changing bodies. This is normal. As you get older, you will feel less shy.

Is it normal to get pimples during your period?

Yes, many girls and women will get pimples just before or during their period. Pimples look like small bumps under your skin.

Is it normal that some girls become angry, happy, or sad when they have their period?

Yes, the hormones that are moving in a girl's body when she has her period can sometimes cause their mood to change quickly.

Is it normal that sometimes a girl will get clots coming out with her period?

Yes, thick clumps of blood in your period are normal and are called clots. They are more frequent when you have been lying down. You may see more when you wake up in the morning.

Is it normal to get water-like or white discharge right before or after your period?

Yes, once a girl's body starts to develop, having some clear or milky-white substance coming from her vagina is normal. This is called discharge. During her period, the menstrual blood can be of different colours, including bright red, light pink, or even brown in colour.

TRUE OR FALSE?

If you become pregnant and have a baby, you will stop having periods and stomach pains forever.

FALSE

White, milky discharge can be present before and after a girls' period. This is normal.

TRUE

There is no cure to completely stop the stomach pains you feel during your periods.

TRUE

Only girls who have had sexual relations with boys experience their periods or develop breasts at an early age.

FALSE

Some girls and women have small breasts, while others may have bigger ones. Any size is natural.

TRUE

You can go to school and participate in any sports while on your period.

TRUE

When a girl first begins her monthly period, she is now a grown woman who can get married.

FALSE

If a girl's egg is mature, but she has not yet had her first period, she is still able to become pregnant if she has sexual relations.

TRUE



MENSTRUAL MYTHS

A myth is an idea or story that is believed by many people but they are not based on facts.

Below are myths about menstruation that you might hear in Sierra Leone. Based on what you have learned, can you tell which ones are a myth and which ones are facts?

- ☉ It is believed that when you are on your period, you should not plait someone's hair or the person's hair will break. **Myth**
- ☉ If a menstruating girl touches any plant, it will keep growing. **Fact**
- ☉ It is said when you are on your period, you should not climb a tree or the tree will stop bearing fruits. **Myth**

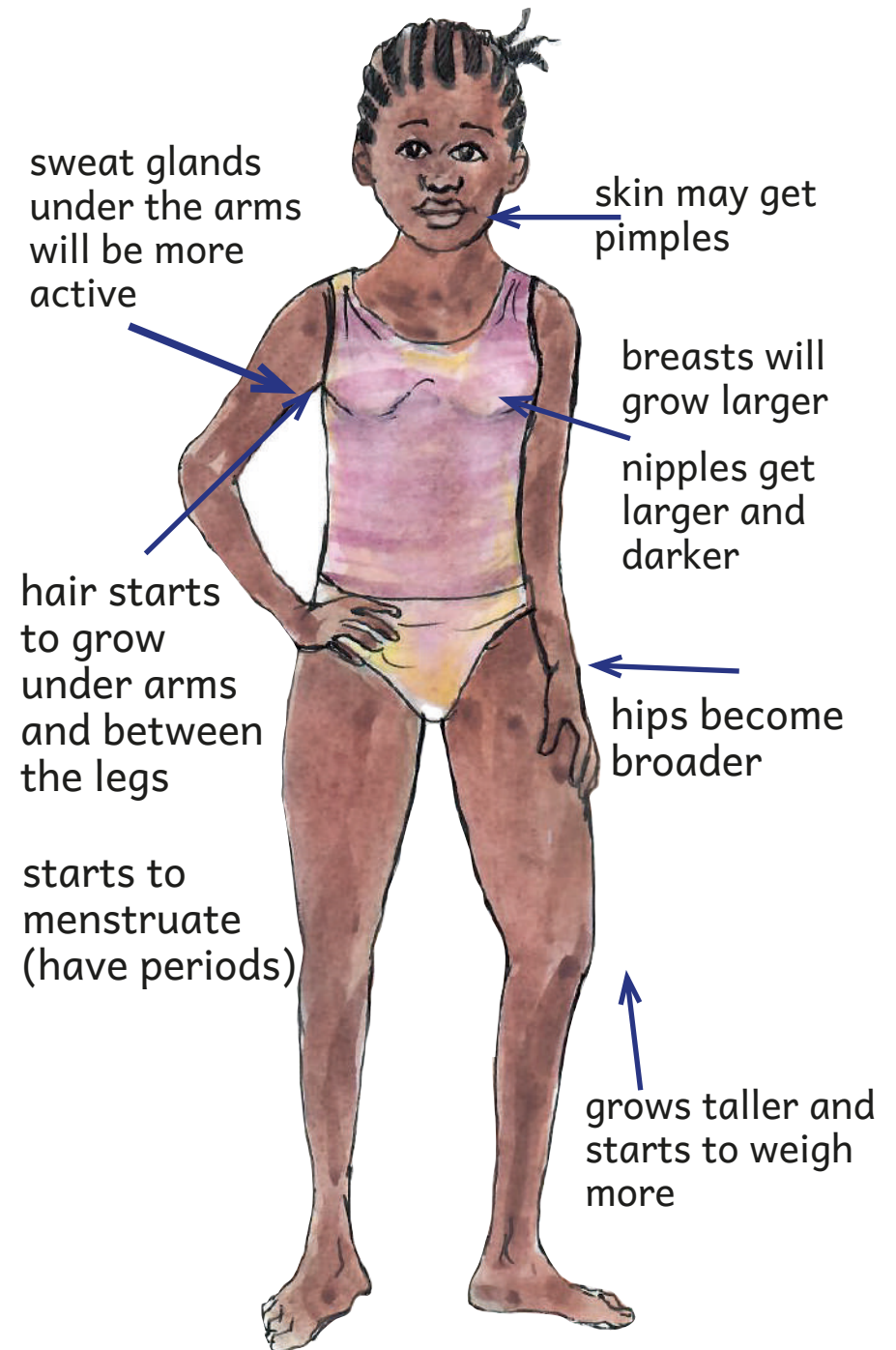
- ☉ It is said that when you are on your period, you should not make yogurt, otherwise it will spoil. **Myth**
- ☉ When you are seeing your period, you should not eat a lot of palm oil because you will bleed heavily. **Myth**
- ☉ It is believed that a menstruating girl should not drink cold liquid because her blood will clot. **Myth**
- ☉ On average, it takes 3-4 years for a girls' breasts to develop. **Fact**
- ☉ You can go to school or play any sports during your menstruation. **Fact**



BODY CHANGES

Body Changes in Girls During Puberty

- Your skin makes more oils, so you may get pimples.
- Your nipples will get bigger and darker in color.
- Your breasts will grow larger and be more sensitive.
- Hair will grow in your armpits and around your vagina.
- Sweat glands under your arms will be more active, so you will smell more like an adult.
- Your hips will become broader.
- You will grow taller more quickly than you grew before.
- You will start having your period.



UNDERSTANDING BOYS

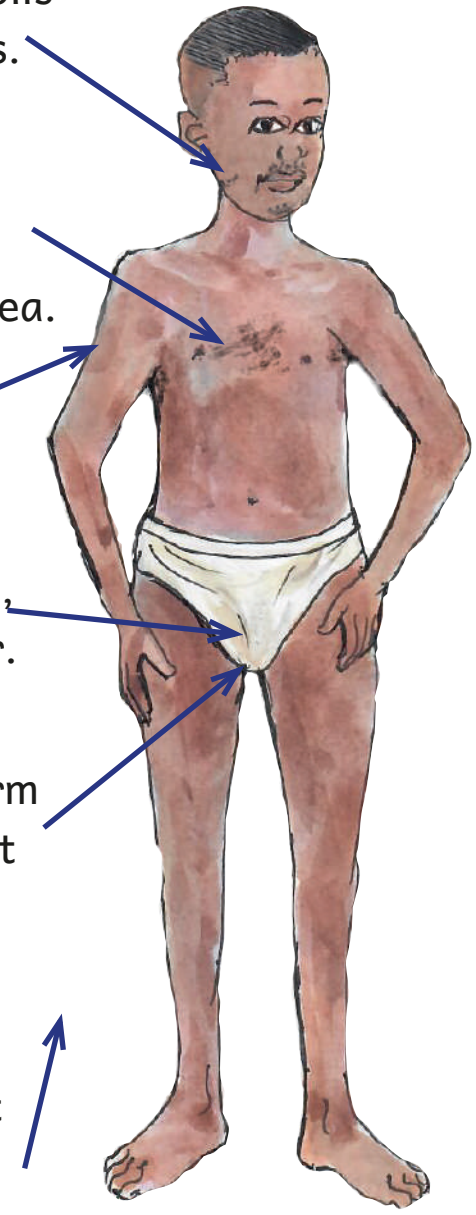
Boys will start having wet dreams and erections during puberty. An erection is when the internal tissue in the penis fills with more blood than usual, grows larger, and points away from the body. Having wet dreams or erections can be embarrassing for a boy and can happen when they are not expecting them.

Body Changes in Boys During Puberty

Boys often start going through the changes of puberty after girls. The changes boys go through include:

- His voice will become deeper.
- His muscles start to grow bigger.
- His sweat glands become more active, so he will smell more like an adult.

- His skin makes more oils so he may get pimples.
- He grows hair in new places like his upper lip and chin, chest, armpits, and pubic area.
- His shoulders get broader and muscles grow.
- His testicles, scrotum, and penis grow larger.
- He will be able to ejaculate sperm. Sperm are the male cells that make it possible for a man to create a baby with a woman.
- His height and weight increase.



Congratulations!

You have now learned about growing from a girl into a young woman.

We hope you feel beautiful, strong, and proud of your body!



The two books, *Growth and Changes for Girls* and *Growth and Changes for Boys*, are for young people who are in their last year of primary school (Class 6) and who are reaching early puberty. Boys and girls will find valuable information and answers to important questions about their physical development and health. These books can be read independently or with the support of a trusted, informed, approachable adult.

Girls and boys are encouraged to read both books. It is recommended that girls and boys read and discuss the books in separate groups, because they may be shy to discuss these topics in mixed groups.



Transforming Girls' Education Project (TGEP) is a project funded by the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada (GAC) implemented by CODE in partnership with The Association of Language and Literacy Educators (TALLE) and McGill University. The project aims to improve learning outcomes for girls attending upper primary classes (grades 4 to 6) when barriers to girls' access to education increase. The project is focused in four districts in Sierra Leone (Karene, Bonthe, Port Loko and Western Rural Districts). While TGEP is designed especially for girls, it supports all children's growth and development to reach their full potential. The TGEP program benefits include the support of Teacher Educators across Sierra Leone; Pre-service Teacher Education, In-service Teacher Training; Teaching Guides; and other resources.

Grow & Know develops puberty books in partnership with local stakeholders in each new country with the overall aim of empowering girls and boys about their changing bodies, enabling them to feel confident as they grow up. Participatory research with girls and boys is conducted in each new country, to capture their stories and questions that are included in the book. To date, they have developed books in nine countries and distributed over two million copies. www.growandknow.org

TALLE is a Sierra Leonean NGO of Language Arts Educators who support the effective teaching and learning of Language Arts to boost quality learning outcomes among students. TALLE-RSL works with education stakeholders to promote the use of appropriate student-friendly methods and materials in teaching students' skills that help them think, read, and communicate meaningfully and well.

CODE (formerly the Canadian Organization for Development through Education). Since 1959, CODE has been working towards its vision of a literate world, growing into Canada's leading international development agency focused on education and literacy. CODE has been active in Sierra Leone since 2011, focusing on childhood literacy and supporting the creation of locally produced, culturally meaningful books for children. www.code.ngo

This book provides information for girls in Sierra Leone who are on their journey to becoming young women. You will read first-hand stories about growing into young women, and get advice from your peers in Sierra Leone.

Not for Sale

Canada

code

Promoting every
child's right to read

Reading Level:
610-1000L
Class 6, ages 9+

