

FAQs by students – For educators

Disclaimer: The following is a list of commonly asked questions that Public Health Nurses have received from students. Educators should use their own judgement when responding to questions. The answers provided are suggestions only and are not a substitute for professional medical advice. Educators should encourage students to consult their parents or guardians, and/or qualified healthcare professionals for personal guidance related to sexual health. Educators should approach questions about sexual health with sensitivity, respect, and an understanding of the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of their students. When responding to a student question, the response should be adapted to reflect the age and maturity of the student as well as the classroom environment and individual school policies.

Important note regarding gender inclusivity: Incorporating gender inclusivity celebrates and acknowledges all forms of gender and sexual identities. This language enables students to fully engage with and absorb sexual health information, while valuing all students. The following questions take an inclusive approach where the emphasis is put on physiology and not gender.

- Assigned female or male at birth: Sex at birth is typically assigned based on a person's reproductive system and external anatomy. The assigned sex does not always tell the individual's full story and gender is much more complex.

PUBERTY

General questions about puberty

Q: What is puberty?

A: Puberty is the term used to describe the period when a person's body begins to develop and change as they move from being a child to an adult. Hormones in the body cause both physical and emotional changes. Puberty usually starts between 8 and 16 years old for those assigned female at birth, and between 12 and 18 years old for those assigned male at birth. Everybody is unique, and puberty happens at different rates for everyone. Some changes may occur at a young age and other changes may happen years later.

Q: When do people start to shave?

A: During puberty, hair can grow on legs, faces, under arms and on the genitals. As youth develop and get older, they may choose to keep or remove the hair. Hair removal is a personal choice. There are no health benefits to removing hair and youth can choose what feels right for them.

Q: Why is my voice changing during puberty?

A: It is normal to experience voice changes as people develop from a child into an adult. During puberty, the larynx (voice box) starts to grow, and it might stick out in the neck area, and often referred to as the Adam's apple. As the larynx grows, it deepens the voice.

Q: When do breasts develop?

A: For people assigned female at birth, often, the initial puberty change is the development of breast tissue. Puberty is different for everyone, and the changes usually take place between 8 and 18 years. At first, small, raised bumps behind the nipple develop, and the bumps will continue to grow and take shape as breasts. One breast may develop before the other, this is completely normal. Even once fully developed, breasts can be different shapes and sizes.

Q: What is acne?

A: Due to hormonal changes, youth may notice their skin becoming more oily, and pimples start to appear on the face and body. If youth have concerns about their skin, they should speak to their health care provider.

Q: Why am I starting to have body odour?

A: During puberty, the body's sweat glands become more active, which can mean an increase in body odour. This is normal. There are products that can be used to assist with body odour including antiperspirants and deodorants. Students should talk to their parent or guardian about options.

Q: What does circumcised mean?

A: Circumcised means that the foreskin (the skin covering the head of the penis) has been surgically removed. On an uncircumcised penis, the foreskin is still covering the head but can be slid back. All penises, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, work the same!

Q: How do you clean the vagina?

A: Vaginas have the ability to clean themselves. It is not necessary to douche (washing the inside of the vagina with fluid). Douching can cause an infection by destroying the vagina's good bacteria. Douching products can irritate the delicate lining of the vagina. Wash external genitals with a mild unscented soap and warm water when showering or bathing.

Questions about the menstrual cycle

Q: What is a period?

A: A period is the part of the menstrual cycle when the uterus sheds its lining, and the tissues and blood leave the body through the vagina. The medical term for getting a period is menstruation or "menses".

Q: When do people get their first period?

A: Menstruation, also called a period, starts during puberty. Starting menstruation is a

healthy part of growing up. If a person with ovaries and a uterus (assigned female at birth) has not had a period by age 15, they should visit a healthcare provider for a checkup. Although there is no way to know exactly when menstruation is going to start, there may be signs including bloating, pimples, sore breasts, and feeling strong emotions. A white or clear discharge may be present up to six months before the start of the first period. The menstrual cycle continues until approximately age 50. Keeping feminine hygiene products such as a tampon or pad in their school bag can help students be prepared for when their period does arrive.

Q: How long does a period last?

A: Each period lasts between 2-8 days.

Q: Can't people just hold in their period and let it out when they go to the bathroom, just like pee?

A: No, it is not possible to hold in menstrual blood and let it out when going to the bathroom, like pee. Urine and menstrual blood do not leave the body from the same place. Urine leaves the body from the urethra, which has sphincters (muscles), allowing for some control. Menstrual blood exits the body through the vagina. The vagina does not have any sphincters; therefore, you cannot control holding in your period.

Note to educators: It may be useful to use a diagram of the external genitals to show how the urethral opening and the vaginal opening are two different orifices (holes).

Q: Can I go swimming when I am menstruating/on my period?

A: Yes, absolutely. Individuals can continue to enjoy the same activities they do when they do not have their period. Tampons, a menstrual cup, or period swimsuits are some options to consider. Students can talk to their parents or guardians about different options.

Q: Can pregnancy happen before someone gets their first period?

A: Yes, pregnancy can happen prior to getting the first period. People assigned female at birth start ovulating before they reach menarche (their first period). Ovulation needs to occur for pregnancy to happen, therefore it is possible to become pregnant before menarche.

Q: Are periods painful?

A: For some people, periods can be uncomfortable. Some people can experience mild to severe cramping, while the uterus is contracting to discard the menstrual blood from the vagina. A warm compress placed on the belly, exercise and medication can help reduce the pain. Students can speak to their parents, guardians and/or healthcare providers for guidance on handling period pain.

Q: What is vaginal discharge?

A: During puberty, the lining of the vagina will begin to produce a white or clear, odourless, discharge. This is normal, and it helps to clean and moisten the vagina. If

symptoms of itching, burning, a strong odour, or change in colour are present, these may be signs of an infection, and a health care provider should be consulted.

Q: Do tampons take away virginity?

A: Some people use the term virginity to refer to when someone has never had sex, or sexual activity with another person. Using tampons is not a form of sexual activity. A tampon is a product put in the vagina to absorb menstrual blood before it leaves the body.

Questions about erections and ejaculation

Q: What is an erection?

A: An erection happens when extra blood flows to the penis causing it to become larger and stiffer. The penis may stick straight out or curve up or down. Erections can happen at any time, often when the person is sexually excited, but can also happen when they're not. During puberty, it is common to get random erections that happen for no reason at all, this is called a spontaneous erection.

Q: Do erections hurt?

A: Generally speaking, erections don't hurt. They are a normal part of sexual arousal. No two people are exactly the same in how they respond sexually. Speaking with a health care provider is recommended if experiencing pain during an erection or when ejaculating.

Q: What happens if someone gets an erection while at school?

A: During puberty it is common to get random erections that happen for no reason at all: this is called a spontaneous erection. If someone gets an erection while at school, they can hold an object, like a book or back-pack, in front of themselves and try to think about something else. It will go away on its own.

Q: What is ejaculation?

A: Ejaculation is when sperm and other liquids are released from inside the reproductive tract and come out through the penis. About a year after the penis starts to grow, most people assigned male at birth will experience their first ejaculation. Ejaculations can occur during sleep. This is called nocturnal emission, or "wet dreams" and it is very common.

Q: What is a wet dream?

A: A wet dream or nocturnal emission is when a penis gets hard (erect) and releases semen (ejaculates) while a person is asleep. They might notice that once they wake up, their underwear or pajamas are wet. This is semen that came out from the penis while sleeping. Wet dreams start to happen during puberty, when the body is starting to produce a hormone called testosterone. They are completely normal, and part of growing up.

Q: Can females ejaculate too?

A: Yes, some can. When the clitoris or G spot is stimulated, a clear fluid can spurt from

the urethra during sexual excitement or when having an orgasm. This is called female ejaculation.

General questions about sex and pregnancy

Q: What is sex?

A: Sex is a completely natural and normal activity – meant to be an intimate act, whether it is self-pleasuring or masturbation, or shared with a trusted partner. Sexual contact includes any contact with the vulva, clitoris, vagina, anus, penis or testicles between two or more people. Examples of sexual contact:

- Skin to genitals
- Mouth to genitals (oral sex)
- Penetration (vaginal or anal)

Q: How do people get pregnant?

A: During puberty, people with penises and testes start to produce sperm and can ejaculate. During ejaculation, the penis releases semen, which contains sperm. Sperm needs to be released inside of, or close to the opening of a vagina for pregnancy to occur.

About once a month, one of the ovaries in the body of a person assigned female at birth, releases an egg. This process is called ovulation. The egg travels down a fallopian tube towards the uterus. The lining of the uterus will thicken into a cushion of blood vessels and tissue to prepare for a possible pregnancy. If an egg meets a sperm (fertilization), it may attach to the lining of the uterus and grow into an embryo. The embryo will eventually develop into a fetus and then leave the body as a baby once fully developed, typically around 9 months' time.

Q: Can men get pregnant?

A: If a man has a penis and testicles, pregnancy is not possible. However, as long as the person has a uterus, ovaries and are ovulating, pregnancy is possible.

Q: What is a C-section?

A: A C-section is the delivery of a baby through a surgical opening in the lower belly instead of through the vagina. A C-section is needed in a number of circumstances. Sometimes these are related to the baby and sometimes the mother.

Q: What is vaginal childbirth?

A: A vaginal birth means that the baby is born through the vagina.

Q: How do twins happen?

A: There are two ways that twins can happen:

Identical twins are made when one egg gets fertilized by one sperm, and the egg splits in half (into 2 separate embryos). Because identical twins come from the same sperm and egg, they have the same genetic material (DNA), will be the same sex and look exactly alike.

Fraternal twins (non-identical twins) are made when two different eggs are fertilized by two different sperm, and both fertilized eggs implant in the uterus. This can happen if your ovaries release more than one egg, or during certain kinds of fertility treatments. Non-identical twins have completely different genetic material (DNA), and usually don't look exactly alike. They are the most common type of twin.

Q: Why are some people born with developmental differences?

A: Most developmental disabilities begin before a baby is born, but some can happen after birth because of injury, infection, or other factors. Some factors that may contribute to developmental differences include genetics, parental health, and unhealthy behaviours during pregnancy (smoking/drinking), complications during birth, infections, exposure to environmental toxins, or it can just be random.

SEXUAL HEALTH

General questions about sexual health

Q: What is sex?

A: Sex is a completely natural and normal activity – meant to be an intimate act, whether it is self-pleasuring or masturbation, or shared with a trusted partner. Sexual contact includes any contact with the vulva, clitoris, vagina, anus, penis or testicles between two or more people. Examples of sexual contact:

- Skin to genitals
- Mouth to genitals (oral sex)
- Penetration (vaginal or anal)

Q: What is masturbation?

A: Masturbation is a normal and healthy way to experience sexual pleasure. It generally involves a person touching their own genitals with their own hand and/or sex toy. Some of the slang terms for masturbation are jacking off, jerking off, rubbing one out, self-love, or flicking the bean. It is a normal way for a person to learn about their body through exploration. While masturbation is normal, it should only be done in private.

Q: What is the “G-spot”?

A: The G-spot is located inside the vagina. It is sensitive to touch, so when the person is sexually aroused and it is stimulated, it can swell which can lead to an orgasm for some people. Not everyone enjoys having their G-spot touched however, and some people don't experience an orgasm from stimulating the G-spot. It's important to respect that everyone's bodies and experiences are different.

Q: What is abstinence?

A: You might decide that you want to be abstinent. That is perfectly alright! Abstinence means not having vaginal, oral, or anal sex with a partner. Complete abstinence is the only way to guarantee that someone won't get pregnant and/or get a sexually transmitted and blood borne infection (STBBI). People can choose to be abstinent even

if they have had sex before. Many people choose abstinence based on religious, cultural, and/or personal beliefs. Learn more about [Abstinence](#).

Q: What is a virgin?

A: Sometimes people use the term “virgin” to refer to someone who has never had sex. The term “sex” can be defined differently by a person’s personal beliefs, cultural influences, faith, and values. It may seem like there is a lot of pressure around virginity; however, making the choice to be sexually active or not is entirely yours.

Q: What is sexting?

A: Sexting is sending and receiving sexual messages through technology such as a phone, app, email, or webcam. For some people, sexting is a way to explore sexuality, trust, boundaries, and intimacy. However, in some cases, sexting is used to bully, blackmail and exploit. It is important to be careful about what is shared online with others. Once intimate messages or pictures are shared on the internet or social media, they can be easily shared by others and become nearly impossible to retrieve.

Q: What is a pap test?

A: A pap test (swab taken from the cervix) screens for cervical cancer. Any person with a cervix (assigned female at birth) who is or has been sexually active should have cervical screening starting at the age of 21. Pap tests are recommended every 3 years, unless otherwise indicated by a health care provider.

Questions about gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation

Q: What is the difference between a boy and a girl?

A: When a baby is born, they get assigned a sex at birth based on the genitals they are born with. This is what is documented on the birth certificate. It is important to note however, that biological or assigned sex at birth, does not always tell the complete story. Sometimes, people do not identify with their assigned sex at birth. How someone feels on the inside and how they choose to express those feelings, is known as gender identity. Some people’s assigned sex at birth and gender identity are the same, and other people feel that their assigned sex is of a different gender from their gender identity. For example, someone’s assigned sex is female, but their gender identity is male.

Q: What is gender identity?

A: A person’s gender identity is each person’s internal and individual experience of gender. Gender identity may be different or the same from the sex assigned at birth. For example, an individual assigned male at birth may identify as female, etc.

Q: What is gender expression?

A: Gender expression is how a person publicly presents their gender. This can include behaviour and outward appearance such as clothing, hair, make-up, body language and voice. A person’s chosen name and pronoun are also common ways of expressing gender.

Q: What is sexual orientation?

A: Sexual orientation refers to a person's sexual and romantic attraction (heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual).

Q: How do I know if I am bisexual, gay, or lesbian?

A: Sometimes it takes time to understand your sexual orientation. Some people know their sexual orientation at a young age, while others know later in life. An individual may prefer not to label their orientation, since they may also be trying to understand their sexual identity. With time, people may even change their sexual orientation, and that's okay too!

Q: How can you tell if someone is gay, lesbian, or bisexual?

A: You can't. A person's appearance, income, mannerisms, profession, or political views are all unrelated to their sexual orientation. Labeling or judging others based on stereotypes is not okay!

Q: What is homophobia?

A: Homophobia is the fear, dislike, aversion, intolerance, and ignorance of homosexuals and homosexuality.

Q: Is it normal to have sexual feelings for same sex people?

A: Of course! Not only is it normal, but it is fairly common as well. Many people, not just people who identify as 2SLGBTQI+, have sexual feelings for members of the same or similar gender or sex. Sexual feelings and fantasies provide a way for a person to explore their curiosities, feelings, and desires. Feelings do not need to translate into actions unless a person is comfortable with that. If attraction to the same sex continues, have comfort in knowing that many people feel the same way.

Q: Gender identity - I'm confused about my gender. Who can I talk to?

A: Here are two great services in Ottawa, that may be helpful:

- [Youth Services Bureau](#) offers counseling and therapy for ages 12-20 at 613-562-3004.

- [Family Service Centre of Ottawa](#) offers counseling and therapy for all ages on a sliding fee scale.

Q: What does 2SLGBTQI+ stand for?

A: It is the acronym used by the [Government of Canada](#) to refer to this Canadian community.

- 2S: at the front, recognizes Two-Spirit people as the first 2SLGBTQI+ communities;
- L: Lesbian;
- G: Gay;
- B: Bisexual;
- T: Transgender;

- Q: Queer;
- I: Intersex, considers sex characteristics beyond sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression;
- +: is inclusive of people who identify as part of sexual and gender diverse communities, who use additional terminologies.

Q: What is pansexuality?

A: **Pansexuality** or **omnisexuality** refers to the attraction to people of all genders, or the feeling that gender does not play a part in sexual attraction.

Q: What does it mean to be two spirited?

A: Two spirited is a term used to refer to people of indigenous ancestry who embody the spirit of both genders and experience varying degrees of gender fluidity.

Q: What does “coming out” mean?

A: “Coming out” is the term used when a person reveals their gender identity or sexual orientation to their family, friends, and peers. It can also be a process of acknowledging and embracing one's own sexual orientation and gender identity.

Questions about pregnancy

Q: Can I get pregnant the first time I have vaginal sex?

A: Yes! Pregnancy can happen anytime you have vaginal sex. Using birth control correctly will lower the chances of becoming pregnant. When considering using birth control, plan to start using it before you start having sex so it will be as effective as possible. It is always a good idea to pair a birth control method with a condom, as a condom will help to reduce the risk of STBBIs.

Q: Can I become pregnant without having sex?

A: While it's not possible to get pregnant through oral sex or through masturbation, there is a chance of pregnancy if there is an opportunity for semen to enter the vagina. For example, if a hand with semen touches the opening to the vagina, the semen can enter this way. Abstinence, birth control methods, or condoms are effective ways to prevent pregnancy.

Q: How will I know if I am pregnant?

A: If you have missed a period, or if your period is late, you can take a home pregnancy test to find out if you are pregnant. Your health care provider or the City of Ottawa's Sexual Health Centre can provide free pregnancy testing and discuss options available to you. The earliest a urine pregnancy test will be accurate is 2 weeks after sex. Periods/menstruation may be late for several other reasons. Some people have irregular cycles, and do not have a period at the same time each month. Changes in body weight, stress levels, or inadequate nutrition may also affect menstruation.

Q: What is a miscarriage?

A: A miscarriage is when a pregnancy is lost before the 20th week of pregnancy. Miscarriages are common and usually happen in the first 8 weeks of a pregnancy. Most

often, the reason for a miscarriage is unknown, but it is usually related to the embryo or fetus not developing properly. It is important to know that even if a miscarriage happens, it is possible to have a healthy pregnancy in the future.

Q: What is an abortion?

A: An abortion is a procedure that ends a pregnancy, performed by a healthcare provider. It can also be referred to as a termination of pregnancy. There are 2 different abortion methods available: [Medical abortion and surgical abortion](#). Having to face an unintended pregnancy can be difficult. Every individual's situation is different, and the decision to have an abortion (or not) is extremely personal.

Q: Is Plan B an abortion?

A: Plan B® (levonorgestrel) and Ella® (ulipristal acetate) are used as emergency contraception by delaying the release of an egg from the ovaries. They are not abortion pills and will have no effect if the person is already pregnant.

Questions about STBBI

Q: How could I get an STBBI?

A: STBBIs are spread through sexual contact or through shared drug use equipment (ex. needles, syringes, pipes). If sexually active, both partners should get tested. It is possible to get an STBBI from shared sex toys as well. It is important to wash sex toys before and after each use.

Q: Can I get a STBBI from a toilet seat?

A: No, it is not possible to get an STBBI from a toilet seat. However, it is possible to get an STBBI from shared sex toys. It is important to wash sex toys before and after each use.

Q: Can I get an STBBI from kissing?

A: Most STBBIs are not spread through kissing. It is important however to avoid kissing people with visible sores. Cold sores are caused by certain strains of the herpes virus that often spreads through kissing someone who is infected.

Q: What is Chlamydia?

A: Chlamydia is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a bacteria called Chlamydia trachomatis. It is the most common **bacterial** sexually transmitted infection in Canada.

Q: What is Gonorrhea?

A: Gonorrhea is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a bacteria called Neisseria gonorrhea. It is the second most common bacterial sexually transmitted and blood borne infection (STBBI) in Canada.

Q: What is HPV?

A: Human papillomavirus (HPV) is an extremely common virus with over 100 strains or types. HPV is the most common sexually transmitted and blood borne infection (STBBI)

in Canada. Up to 75% of people will come in contact with this virus during their life. Many people clear the infection within 2 years.

Q: What are genital warts and how are they treated?

A: Genital warts are lesions caused by HPV (Human Papillomavirus). Treatment can include:

- Cryotherapy, a procedure which freezes the warts with liquid nitrogen.
- Topical medications applied directly to the warts.
- Home treatments are available by prescription.
- Laser treatment or minor surgery, which are often used to treat the cervix or other internal warts.

Q: What is a blue waffle?

A: Contrary to what people may have heard, a blue waffle is fictional. It does not exist. Other sexually transmitted and blood borne infections, however, do exist and it is important that partners protect themselves by using barrier methods and getting tested regularly if sexually active.

Questions about birth control and barrier methods

Q: Do I need parental permission to get birth control?

A: Youth do not need to be a certain age to get birth control, nor do they need parents' permission in Ontario.

Q: Is Plan B (emergency contraception) an abortion?

A: Plan B® (levonorgestrel) and Ella® (ulipristal acetate) are used as emergency contraception by delaying the release of an egg from the ovaries. They are not abortion pills and will have no effect if the person is already pregnant.

Q: If I use birth control, are condoms still needed?

A: Yes. Birth control (e.g., an IUD, the pill, the patch, the ring, or the injection) only helps to reduce the risk of pregnancy. Using condoms and birth control together helps to further decrease the chances of an unplanned pregnancy. Using condoms is important to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted and blood borne infections (STBBIs).

Q: Where can I get condoms?

A: Free condoms, including external and internal condoms, and dental dams, can be ordered at [Sex it Smart](#). You can also buy them at drug stores and grocery stores that have a pharmacy.

Q: How do I know what size condom to use?

A: There are many different brands of condoms and sizes do vary between each. Standard size condoms fit most people comfortably due to their ability to stretch. Condoms are supposed to be tight but not uncomfortable. Experiment with different brands and sizing to find the perfect fit.

Q: Why are condoms flavoured?

A: Some condoms are flavoured to encourage their use for oral sex. The flavoured coating helps mask the taste of latex and makes oral sex more enjoyable.

Q: Can people wear an external condom and internal condom at the same time, for better protection?

A: No. An internal condom and an external condom should not be used together. Using them together increases the chance of tearing or breaking. Only use one or the other for protection.

Q: What is an internal condom?

A: An internal condom is a soft, thin, loose fitting polyurethane sheath with two flexible rings at each end. It is inserted vaginally or anally. The inner ring at the closed end of the condom is used to insert the condom in the vagina and keep it in place. If the condom is being used for anal sex, the inner ring is removed. The outer ring at the open end of the condom stays outside the vagina or anus, and partially covers and protects the lips of the vagina or edges of the anus.

Q: What is an external condom?

A: The external condom is a thin sheath that covers the penis. Most condoms are made of latex, although polyurethane, plastic, and lambskin condoms are available. A variety of external condoms are available: plain or reservoir-tipped, dry or lubricated, straight or shaped, smooth or textured, natural or brightly colored, and in many sizes.

References

[The Link Ottawa - The LINK \(TheLinkOttawa.ca\)](http://TheLinkOttawa.ca)

[Parenting in Ottawa \(ParentingInOttawa.ca\)](http://ParentingInOttawa.ca)

[Planned Parenthood \(PlannedParenthood.org\)](http://PlannedParenthood.org)

[Kids Help Phone \(KidsHelpPhone.ca\)](http://KidsHelpPhone.ca)

[Ontario Human Rights Commission \(ohrc.on.ca\)](http://ohrc.on.ca)

[Caring for kids \(CaringForKids.cps.ca\)](http://CaringForKids.cps.ca)

[Pregnancy Info \(PregnancyInfo.ca\)](http://PregnancyInfo.ca)

[Kids Health \(KidsHealth.org\)](http://KidsHealth.org)

[Teaching Sexual Health | Alberta Health Services \(TeachingSexualHealth.ca\)](http://TeachingSexualHealth.ca)

[Statistics Canada \(StatCan.gc.ca\)](http://StatCan.gc.ca)

[Sex & U \(SexAndU.ca\)](http://SexAndU.ca)

[Healthline \(Healthline.com\)](http://Healthline.com)

[Government of Canada \(Canada.ca\)](http://Canada.ca)

Last updated: August 2023