

# Endocrine Problems after Childhood Cancer: Precocious Puberty

Children treated for cancer may develop problems as a result of damage to the complex system of glands known as the endocrine system.

## WHAT IS THE ENDOCRINE SYSTEM?

The endocrine system is a group of glands that regulate body functions including growth, puberty, energy level, urine production, and stress response. Glands of the endocrine system include the pituitary, hypothalamus, thyroid, adrenal, pancreas, ovaries (in females), and testes (in males). The hypothalamus and pituitary are sometimes called the “master glands” because they control many other glands in the endocrine system. Unfortunately, some treatments given for childhood cancer can damage the hypothalamus and pituitary gland, resulting in a variety of problems.

## WHAT ARE HORMONES?

Hormones are chemical messengers that carry information from the endocrine glands through the bloodstream. The endocrine system makes many hormones (such as growth hormone, sex hormones, adrenal and thyroid hormones) that maintain specific bodily functions.

## WHAT IS THE NORMAL AGE FOR PUBERTY TO BEGIN?

Puberty normally begins between the ages of 8 and 13 in girls, and 9 and 14 in boys. The timing of puberty is influenced by a person’s genetic background, and the onset of puberty at a young age may run in families. Most girls begin to develop breasts and then pubic hair at around age 10 or 11. Menstrual periods usually start at around 12 to 13 years of age, but may occur earlier or later and still be normal. Boys usually begin to develop enlargement of the testicles and then pubic hair between 11 and 12 years of age.

## WHAT IS PRECOCIOUS PUBERTY?

Precocious puberty means having signs of puberty (such as pubic hair or breast growth) at an age younger than is normally expected. Most doctors agree that a girl has precocious puberty if she develops sexual traits earlier than age 8, and a boy has precocious puberty if he develops sexual traits prior to age 9.

The early release of hormones that causes precocious puberty also causes a growth spurt, with rapid bone growth. Early bone maturation results in less time for growth, so the child with precocious puberty will have a final adult height that is actually much shorter than normal.

## WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS FOR DEVELOPING PRECOCIOUS PUBERTY?

Risk factors include:

- Radiation to the head or brain, especially doses of 18 Gy (1800 cGy/rads) or higher, including the following fields:
  - Head/brain (cranial)
  - Nasopharyngeal (area above the roof of the mouth)
  - Eye or eye socket (orbit)
  - Ear or infratemporal region (midfacial area behind the cheekbones)
- Female gender
- Younger age at the time of cancer treatment

Early puberty is also more common in overweight children.

## WHY DOES PRECOCIOUS PUBERTY HAPPEN?

The hypothalamus and pituitary gland may be damaged after radiation treatments. The damage causes them to signal the ovaries (in girls) or testicles (in boys) to make female or male hormones at an earlier time. In other cases, signs of puberty occur early because of abnormalities in the ovaries, testicles or adrenal glands. Tests are done to learn if the cause of precocious puberty is in the brain or in another part of the body.

## WHAT SCREENING IS RECOMMENDED?

All childhood cancer survivors should have a physical examination at least once a year, including measurement of height and weight, and evaluation of pubertal progress. If there are signs of accelerated growth or early puberty, a blood test to check sex hormones produced in the brain (FSH - follicle stimulating hormone; LH – luteinizing hormone), testes (testosterone) or ovaries (estradiol) may be done. Sometimes, an x-ray that measures the developmental age or maturation of bone (bone age) may also be done.

## HOW IS PRECOCIOUS PUBERTY TREATED?

If a problem is detected, a referral should be made to an endocrinologist (doctor who specializes in hormone problems). Medications may be used to temporarily stop puberty and to decrease the rate of bone maturation. It is also important to evaluate and manage the psychological effects of beginning puberty too early. Although children with precocious puberty may have a mature physical appearance, their thoughts, emotions and behaviors are still that of their actual (chronological) age.

Additional health information for childhood cancer survivors is available at [www.survivorshipguidelines.org](http://www.survivorshipguidelines.org)

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