

Hygiene: pre-teens and teenagers

Key points

- **Good hygiene is important for teenage health and confidence.**
- **Basic hygiene is washing your hands, cleaning your body and teeth, and covering your mouth when coughing.**
- **Teenage hygiene also involves periods, body odour, shaving and more.**
- **You can be a great role model for teenagers by having good personal hygiene yourself.**

Helping pre-teens and teenagers build personal hygiene habits

When your child was younger, you taught your child the basics of good hygiene – washing hands (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/healthy-lifestyle/hygiene-dental-care/hand-washing-in-pictures>), covering their mouth when they cough, and having regular baths or showers. You had to help your child with things like cleaning and flossing teeth, at least to start with.

Adolescence is a time to build on these basics. It's a time when your child's changing body (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/development/puberty-sexual-development/physical-changes-in-puberty>) means that personal hygiene will need to change too – for example, your child will need to start using deodorant. And just like when your child was younger, you might need to help them get started.



Good hygiene habits in childhood are a great foundation for good hygiene in the teenage years. And if you've got open, honest communication with your child, it'll make it easier to talk about the personal hygiene issues that come up in adolescence.

Why good personal hygiene matters

Keeping clean is an **important part of staying healthy**. For example, the simple act of washing hands before eating and after using the toilet is a proven and effective way of fighting off germs and avoiding sickness.

Being clean is also an important part of confidence for teenagers (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/development/social-emotional-development/confidence-in-teens>). If your child's body and breath smell OK, their clothes are clean, and they're on top of their basic personal hygiene, it can help your child feel comfortable with other people.

Helping your child manage personal hygiene

You've got an important role to play in making sure your child knows about how their body and hygiene needs are going to change, and in getting your child ready to manage the changes. **The earlier you can start having these conversations, the better** – ideally, before your child hits puberty.

You can also be a great role model (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/behaviour/encouraging-good-behaviour/being-a-role-model>) for your child by demonstrating good personal hygiene habits. If your child sees you showering, cleaning your teeth and washing your hands regularly, they'll learn that these habits are important.

You can explain to your child that keeping their body clean – especially their hands – is part of staying healthy. As an example of what germs can do, you could remind them of the last time a bout of ‘gastro’ or flu went through home or school.

Body odour

When children reach puberty, a new type of sweat gland develops in their armpits and genital areas. Skin bacteria feed on the sweat this type of gland produces, and this can lead to body odour (BO).

If your child washes their body and changes their clothes regularly, especially after physical activity, it’ll help to reduce the build-up of bacteria and avoid BO. Changing underwear and other clothes worn next to the skin is especially important. These clothes collect dead skin cells, sweat and body fluids, which bacteria love to eat. That’s why they get smelly.

The onset of puberty is also a good time for your child to start using **antiperspirant deodorant**. You can encourage your child to do this by letting them choose one. Note that there are many products that are deodorants but not antiperspirants. These products simply cover up odour. Antiperspirants stop BO by controlling how much your child sweats.

Smelly feet

Smelly feet and shoes can also be a problem for teenagers, whether they’re sporty or not. Your child can avoid this issue by giving their feet extra attention in the shower, and making sure they’re completely dry before putting shoes on. It’s a good idea to encourage your child to alternate shoes and to wear cotton socks instead of ones made from synthetic fibres.

Dental hygiene

Good dental and mouth hygiene is as important now as it was when your child was little, and you’ll need to keep making regular dental appointments for your child. Brushing teeth twice a day, flossing and going to the dentist regularly are vital if your child wants to avoid bad breath, gum problems and tooth decay.

You can read more about [dental care for pre-teens \(https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/healthy-lifestyle/hygiene-dental-care/dental-care-9-11-years\)](https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/healthy-lifestyle/hygiene-dental-care/dental-care-9-11-years) and [dental care for teenagers \(https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/healthy-lifestyle/hygiene-dental-care/teen-dental-care\)](https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/healthy-lifestyle/hygiene-dental-care/teen-dental-care).

Periods

Your child will need help to manage their [periods \(https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/development/periods-hygiene/periods\)](https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/development/periods-hygiene/periods) at first. For example, you might need to talk with your child about how often to change their pad, tampon or period-proof underwear, and how to dispose of or clean it hygienically.

Shaving

When your child starts to develop facial hair, you might need to give them some advice about when to start shaving and how to do it. You can encourage your child by letting them choose a razor and shaving cream.



Teenagers do need extra time in the bathroom! While they’re learning to shave or to handle their periods, these hygiene activities might take a bit longer. You can help by being patient and giving your child a bit more privacy.

Personal hygiene for pre-teens and teenagers with additional needs

Young people with additional needs are likely to need extra support with their personal hygiene. When you’re thinking about how to discuss hygiene with your child with additional needs, their learning ability and style might be a factor. For example, does your child prefer to learn by listening, seeing or doing?

You could consider breaking hygiene tasks – like showering, shaving, using deodorant and cleaning teeth – into small steps. This way they might be easier for your child to learn.

If your child is in the habit of doing things at the same time each day, hygiene can be a normal and predictable part of a routine. A written schedule might also help your child remember what to do when.

If you're finding it difficult to talk with your child about puberty and periods, you could make an appointment with your GP.



Start early – before puberty. If you keep reinforcing messages about personal hygiene, most children will get there in the end. It will help to give your child praise and encouragement for carrying out hygiene activities. If you're finding it difficult to talk with your child about puberty and periods, you could make an appointment with your GP.

Acknowledgements

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