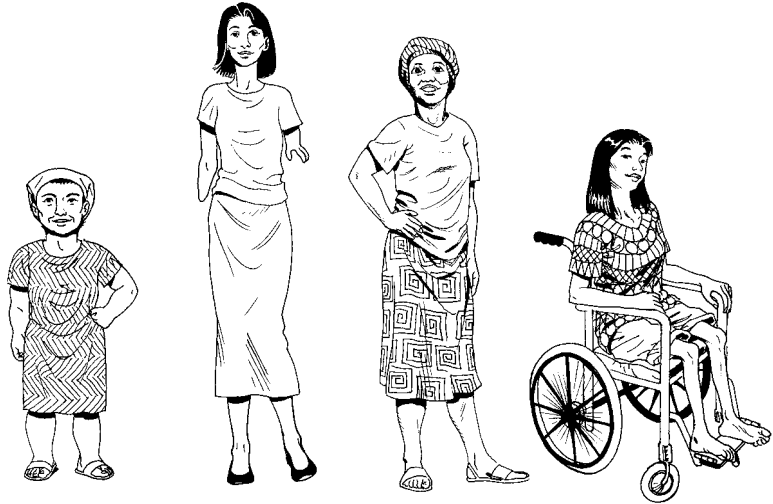


## CHAPTER 4

# Understanding your body

These 4 women's bodies may look different from each other, but they all go through the same changes.



It is important to understand how your body works. The more you know about your body, the better able you will be to take care of yourself. When you understand your body and your normal changes, you will be able to recognize if something happens because of your disability or if it is a normal change that happens to all women. This will also help you decide for yourself if the advice others give you is helpful or harmful.

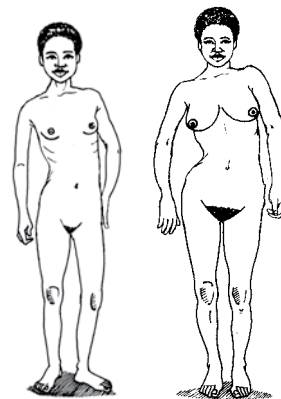
## When a girl's body starts to change (puberty)

However different they seem on the outside, most women's bodies go through the same changes during their lifetime.

Sometime between the ages of 9 and 15, a girl's body begins to grow and change into a woman's body. This is called puberty. Your disability will not prevent this from also happening to you. All these changes are normal and can happen to any girl, whether or not she has a disability.

Here are the main changes you will notice during puberty:

- You grow taller and rounder.
- Hair grows under your arms and between your legs, on your genitals.
- Your breasts grow as they become able to make milk for babies after pregnancy.
- Inside your body, the womb (uterus), tubes, ovaries, and vagina grow and change position.
- Wetness (discharge) starts to come out of your vagina.
- Your monthly bleeding starts (period, menstruation).
- You begin to have more sexual thoughts and urges.
- Your face may get oily, and pimples or spots may grow.
- You may sweat more, and your sweat may smell different than it did before puberty.



These changes are natural and normal. Changes in your body and in your feelings help you be aware that you are changing into a woman who is ready to have a sexual relationship and who can get pregnant.

Still, puberty can be difficult. You may not feel like a girl or like a woman—your body is somewhere in between.

Whether or not you have a disability, during these years it is important for you to look after yourself, to eat healthy food (see page 86), and to stay clean during your monthly bleeding (see page 109). It is equally important for you to protect yourself from sexual abuse (see Chapter 14).

Sometimes, because of the way people treat her, a disabled girl may pity herself and feel ashamed of her body. She may become submissive, withdraw from meeting other people, and be more dependent on family members. For information on self-esteem and mental health, see pages 62 to 63.

## Hormones

Many of the changes a girl experiences while her body is changing are caused by hormones. These are chemicals your body makes that control how and when your body grows. A little while before your first monthly bleeding starts, your body starts to produce more of the hormones called estrogen and progesterone—the 2 main hormones that regulate the menstrual cycle (see page 75).

Hormones also control when a woman can get pregnant—by controlling when her ovaries will release an egg (one egg every month)—and allowing her breasts to make milk to feed her baby after she gives birth. Many family planning methods work to prevent pregnancy by controlling the hormones in a woman's body (see page 196).

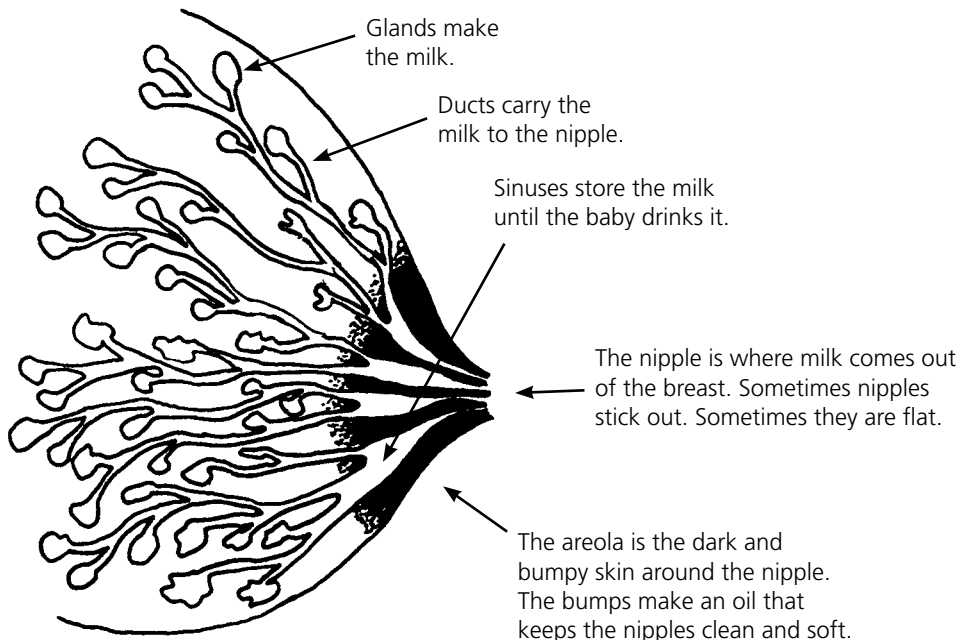
## THE BREASTS

A young girl's breasts start to grow when she is between 9 and 15 years old. You do not have to be shy or self-conscious of your breasts. They are a sign your body is changing into a woman's body. One of your breasts may start to grow before the other, but the smaller breast almost always catches up. Do not be alarmed if your breasts do not look exactly alike. Many women have breasts that are slightly different in size or shape from the other. And if your breasts look different from another girl's breasts, that's just the way breasts are. They come in all shapes and sizes!

As your breasts grow larger, they become able to make milk for babies after pregnancy. Breasts can be very sensitive. When they are touched during sexual relations, they can excite your entire body, making your nipples hard, and your vagina wet and ready for sex.

Your breasts can also get swollen and sore just before monthly bleeding starts, or your nipples may sometimes hurt.

Once your breasts have grown, you should start to examine them once a month to make sure they stay healthy and do not develop any unusual lumps. Usually a woman can find unusual breast lumps herself if she learns how to examine her breasts. Sometimes a breast lump that does not go away can be a sign of breast cancer. Regular health exams will help you find health problems early. See page 128 for information on how to examine your breasts.



## Monthly bleeding (period, menstruation)

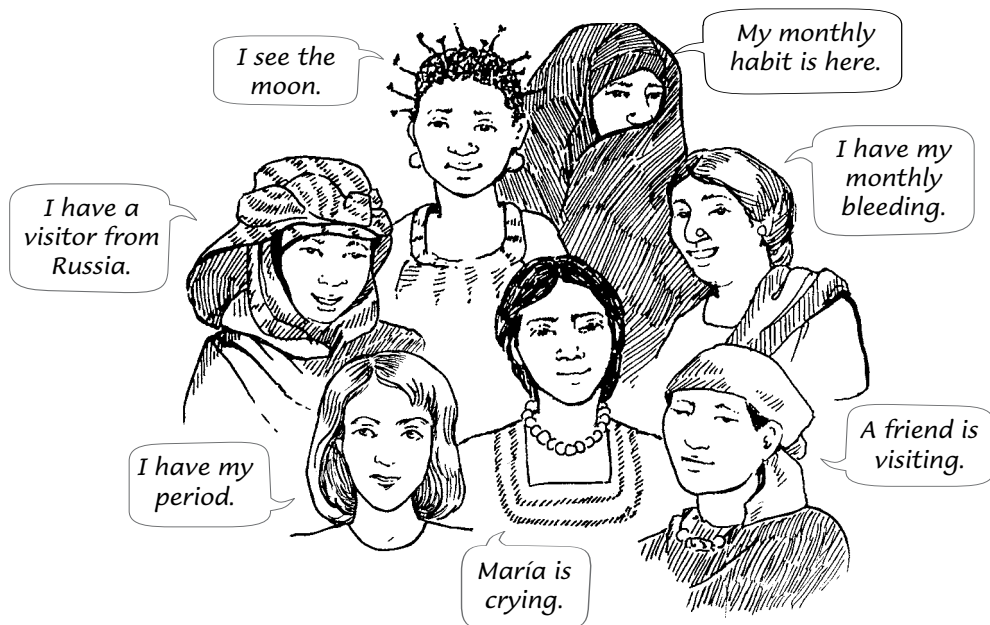
Almost all girls and women with disabilities will have the same monthly bleeding cycle as women who are not disabled. Monthly bleeding is a sign that you can become pregnant. No girl can know exactly when she will get her first monthly bleeding. It usually happens after your breasts and the hair on your body start to grow. Also, several months before your first monthly bleeding, you may notice some wetness coming from your vagina. It may stain your underclothes. This is normal.

You may feel stomach cramps, get a headache, pain in your lower back or breasts, or feel mood changes just before your monthly bleeding starts. For example, you may feel overly sensitive or easily lose your temper.

If you are blind or have difficulty seeing, or if you have difficulty moving your arms or legs, ask your family or friends you trust to help you manage your monthly bleeding. To help a girl or woman who has difficulty understanding or learning about monthly bleeding, see page 110. For information on how to care for yourself during monthly bleeding, see page 109, and for information on sexual health and monthly bleeding, see page 182.

As a woman grows older, her monthly bleeding will end. For most women, this change happens when they are between 45 and 55 years old. For information, see page 282.

Around the world, women have many different names for their monthly bleeding.

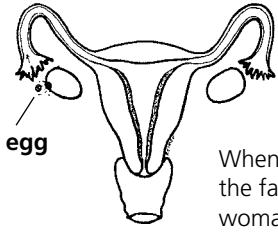


### The monthly cycle (menstrual cycle)

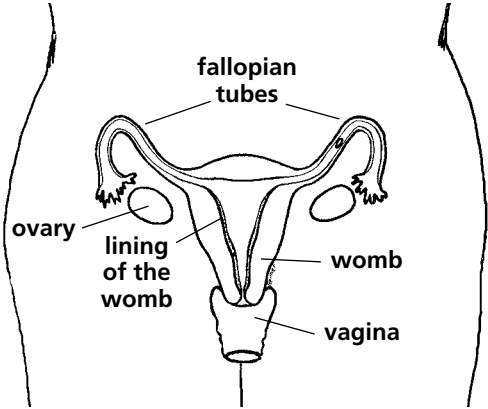
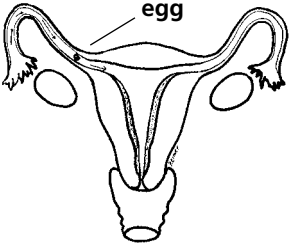
The monthly bleeding cycle is different for each woman. For most women, the whole menstrual cycle takes about 28 days—just like the cycle of the moon. But some women bleed as often as every 20 days, or as little as every 45 days. During the first year you get your monthly bleeding, it will probably come at a different time each month. This is normal. It will take several months for you to start having a regular cycle.

#### The monthly cycle

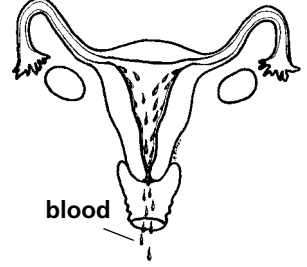
About 14 days before the end of your monthly cycle, an egg is released by one of the ovaries. This is called ovulation. At this time, the hormone progesterone causes the lining of the womb to become thicker and to get ready for the possibility of pregnancy.



When an ovary releases an egg, the egg travels through the fallopian tube into the womb. During this time a woman is fertile, and if she has sex with a man, his sperm may join with her egg to fertilize it and start a pregnancy.

Most of the time, the egg is not fertilized so the thick lining of the womb is not needed. The lining breaks down into a bloody fluid that flows out of the body through the vagina during the monthly bleeding. Then the cycle starts over again.



## When your body changes

It is important to be able to ask questions and express your feelings, especially your confusions and fears, about your changing body and emotions. This is true throughout your entire life, when puberty, sexuality, fertility and childbearing, and menopause can signal great changes for your body and your health. When you accept your physical development, emotions, and sexual feelings, you can care for and respect yourself as a woman. Take the time to examine your own feelings and share them with others:



*To be a healthy woman, I need to know as much as possible about my body and why it changes.*

- Be comfortable with your body and accept your disability as part of your body.
- Learn about sexuality and the responsibilities that accompany sexuality. Older family members, health workers, counselors, and other adults with disabilities can be good sources of information.
- Develop and nurture loving, caring relationships with family, friends, and loved ones. Positive relationships are essential for well-being. These interactions will provide you with an important support network.
- Interact with other girls and women with disabilities, especially women who have jobs and are raising families.
- Avoid spending time with people who make you feel bad.
- Be involved in events outside your home. Treat them as opportunities to explore and develop friendships, and to develop and share the things that you do well.
- Protect yourself from sexual abuse (see Chapter 14).

## HELPING A GIRL BECOME A WOMAN

It is important to prepare a girl for the changes her body will go through as she becomes a woman.

Make sure she learns about monthly bleeding before she has her first period, and help her prepare to manage monthly bleeding when it begins.

Help her understand that her physical and emotional changes are normal.

Older family members and caregivers can encourage a girl to talk and ask questions openly by asking about her body's changes in a light-hearted way. This lets a girl with disability know, even before she begins puberty, that the people closest to her are available for questions.

*Being a teenager is hard enough without having your family pretend that your body is still that of a little girl.*



### ***What families and caregivers can do***

Parents and other family members can:

- Accept that she is becoming a woman changing just like any other girl.
- Help her meet other girls and women with disabilities.
- Encourage her to develop friendships and activities outside the home. This will help give her confidence and a sense of herself.
- Give her good food and timely health care.
- Talk to her about sexuality. Encourage her to ask questions and express her feelings about her sexuality.
- Protect her from sexual abuse.

### ***Coming-of-age ceremonies***

In some communities, the ceremony to mark a girl reaching puberty is a big event to let people know the girl is “grown up” and ready for marriage.

If you live in a community that has ceremonies to mark the change when a girl becomes a woman, make sure your daughter has a coming-of-age ceremony.



In some communities in India the girl is given a ceremonial bath and dressed like a bride. A grand feast follows and the participants present gifts to the girl.

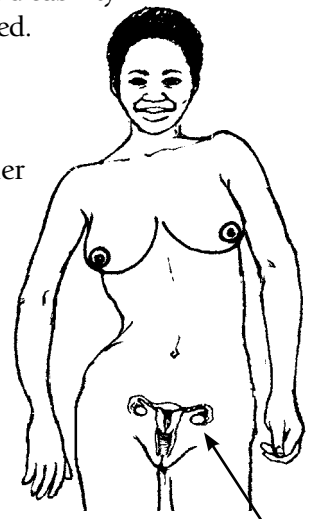
### ***What health workers can do***

Make sure to include girls with disabilities in any health education projects you organize for girls to learn about their bodies. Teach families and schoolteachers of girls and women with disabilities that the body of a girl or a woman with a disability is almost always the same as that of a girl or woman who is not disabled.

## **A woman's reproductive system**

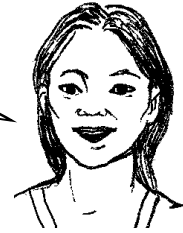
In many ways, a woman's body is no different from a man's, whether or not one of them has a disability. Women and men both have hearts, kidneys, lungs, and other body parts that are the same. But their sexual or reproductive parts are very different. Many women's health problems affect these parts of her body.

The sexual and reproductive parts of women with disabilities and women who do not have disabilities usually look and work in similar ways. The sexual parts outside the body are called the genitals. Inside, they are called the reproductive organs.



A woman's reproductive organs

*Sometimes talking about the sexual parts of our bodies can be difficult, especially if you are shy or do not know what different parts of the body are called. In many places, the reproductive parts of the body are considered 'private.'*



## Sexual parts on the outside

The sexual parts outside the body and between a woman's legs are together called the vulva. The drawing shows what the vulva looks like and what each part is called. But every woman's body is different. There are differences in the size, shape, and color of the parts, especially of the outer and inner folds of skin.

Understanding how your sexual and reproductive parts work will help you know how to get pregnant and also how to prevent pregnancy.

Sometimes people may use the word vagina for the whole area. But the vagina is the part that begins as an opening in the vulva and leads inside to the womb. The vagina is sometimes called the 'birth canal.'

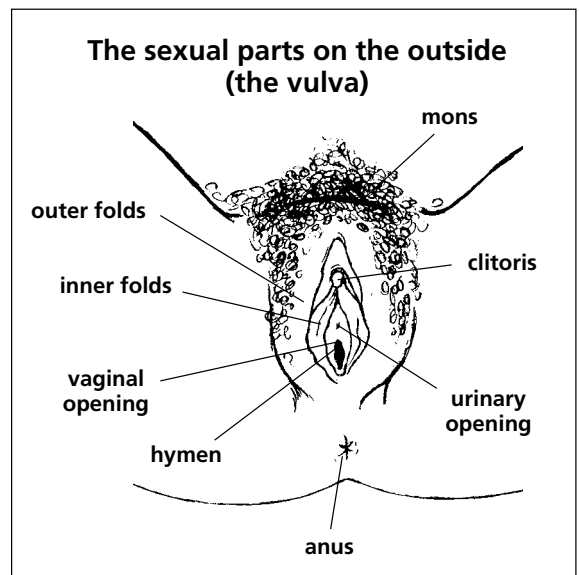
The outer and inner folds of skin protect the vagina. These folds are sometimes called 'lips.' The inner folds of skin are soft, without hair, and are sensitive to touch. During sex, the inner folds swell and turn darker.

The hymen is a thin piece of skin just inside the opening to the vagina. A hymen may stretch or tear and bleed a little because of hard work, sports, or other activities. This can also happen when a woman has sex for the first time. All hymens are different. Some women do not have a hymen at all, and not all women bleed during their first sexual intercourse.

The clitoris is small and shaped like a flower bud. It is the part of the vulva that is most sensitive to touch. Rubbing it, and the area around it, can make a woman sexually excited and cause climax (orgasm).

The urinary opening is a small hole between the vaginal opening and the clitoris. It leads into the urethra, which is a short tube that carries urine from the bladder to the outside of the body.

The anus is the opening of the intestine, where waste (stool) leaves the body.

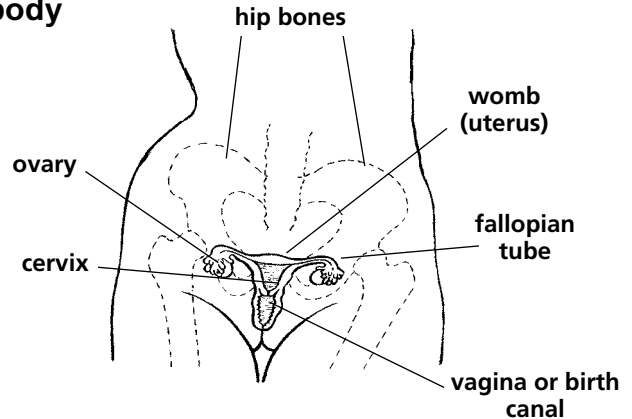




## Sexual parts inside a woman's body

The reproductive parts inside a woman's body are in the pelvic area—the area between the hips. You can feel your hip bones just below your waist. If your hip bones are not shaped evenly, your reproductive parts will not be affected.

A woman has 2 ovaries, one on each side of her womb. Each ovary is about the size of an almond or grape. One of the ovaries releases an egg into one of the fallopian tubes each month. The egg moves through the fallopian tube to the womb (uterus), a small, hollow muscle that stretches and grows larger when a woman is pregnant.



## A man's sexual parts

A man's sexual parts are easier to see than a woman's because they are mostly on the outside of his body. The testicles (balls) make the main male hormone called testosterone. When a boy's body begins to change, it makes more testosterone. This causes the changes that make a boy look like a man. These are like the changes that happen when a girl's body makes more female hormones.

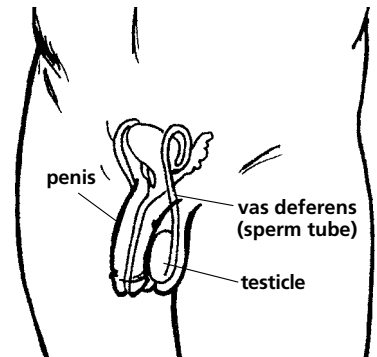
The testicles also make a man's sperm. Sperm travel from the testicles through a tube into the penis where they mix with a liquid produced by glands. This mixture of liquid and sperm is called semen.



## What happens during sex?

During sex, the man's semen comes out of his penis when he ejaculates (comes). Each drop of semen has thousands of sperm, which are too small to see. When the man ejaculates in the woman's vagina or near her genitals, the sperm can enter through the 'mouth' of the womb (the cervix) into the womb.

The vagina is made of a special kind of skin that stretches easily during sex (and also when giving birth). The vagina makes a fluid or wetness (discharge) that helps it keep clean and prevent infection. The vagina makes more fluid than usual during sex to make it easier for the penis to enter, to help prevent tears in the vagina, and to help sperm reach the womb.



## Becoming pregnant

About 14 days after the beginning of each monthly bleeding, when the lining in the womb is ready, an egg is released from one of the ovaries. This is called ovulation. The egg then travels down a tube into the womb. At this time a woman is fertile and can become pregnant. If she has recently had sex with a man, his sperm may enter the womb through the cervix and join with her egg. This is called fertilization and is the beginning of pregnancy. If the egg does not join with a man's sperm, there is no pregnancy, and the lining of the womb is shed during the monthly bleeding.

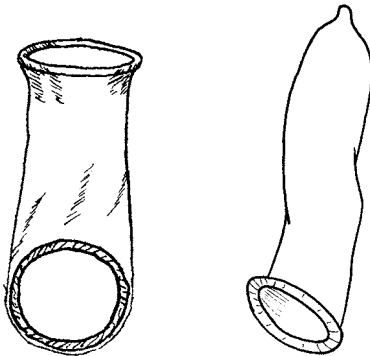


9 months later...



## WHAT EVERY WOMAN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HAVING SEX

- You can get pregnant the first time you have sex with a man.
- You can get pregnant any time you have sex without using a family planning method (even if you have sex only once).
- You can get pregnant even if the man thinks he did not let his sperm (seed) come out.
- You can get a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or HIV if you do not use a condom when you have sex with an infected person. (You cannot tell by looking at a person if he is infected or not—see page 172.)
- It is easier for a girl or a woman to get an STI or HIV from man during sex than it is for her to give these diseases to him. This is because the man's semen stays in her vagina for a long time.
- It is harder to know if a girl or woman has an STI because the signs of infection are often inside her body.



condom for women  
(female condom)

condom for men

Always use either a male condom or a female condom for protection against STIs and HIV/ AIDS. Even though sperm, and the germs that cause infection, are very small, they cannot get through the plastic or latex of a condom if it is put on properly (see pages 190 and 191).

For more information about protecting yourself from infection, see Chapter 8. To prevent unwanted pregnancy, see Chapter 9.

# When you are not able to get pregnant (infertility)

Disability does not cause infertility. Some women with disabilities will be infertile, but no more so than women who are not disabled. If a woman with a disability is infertile, it is usually not because of her disability.



## WHAT IS INFERTILITY?

We say a couple—a man and a woman—is infertile if they cannot get pregnant after having sex together a few times a month for a year, without using a family planning method. A couple may also have a fertility problem if they have had 3 or more miscarriages (lost pregnancies).

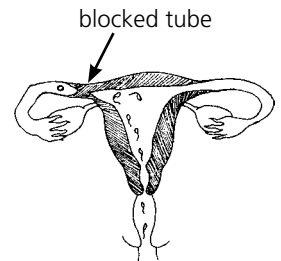
A man or woman who has already had a child can also become infertile. A problem can develop after the last child was born. Sometimes the problem is not the man's or the woman's alone but a combination of the two. And sometimes both partners seem to be healthy and no doctor or test can find out what is causing the problem.

## WHAT CAUSES INFERTILITY?

### Infertility in a woman

The main causes of infertility in a woman are:

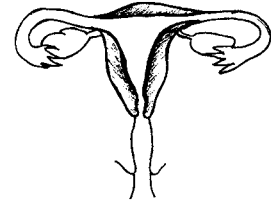
**1. Scarring in the tubes or inside the womb.** Scarring, or thickened rough skin, in the tube can prevent the egg from moving through the tube, or the sperm from reaching the egg. Scarring in the womb can prevent the fertilized egg from attaching to the wall of the womb. Sometimes a woman gets scarring but does not know it because she does not feel ill. But years later she learns she is infertile.



Scarring can be caused by:

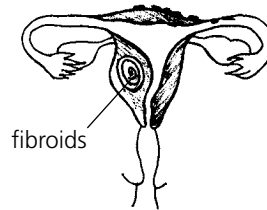
- an infection from an untreated STI that travels up into the womb or tubes (pelvic inflammatory disease or PID), or from tuberculosis (TB) in the pelvis.
- unsafe abortion or problems in childbirth that caused damage or infection in the womb.
- unclean conditions when an intrauterine device (IUD)—a small device implanted inside the womb to prevent pregnancy—was put in, which caused an infection.
- problems from an operation on the vagina, womb, tubes, or ovaries.

**2. Problems with ovulation.** If an infertile woman's monthly bleedings are less than 21 days apart, or more than 35 days apart, she may not produce eggs. This can be caused by her body not making enough hormones, or not making them at the right time. Sometimes this happens as a woman gets older and is close to the end of her cycle of monthly bleeding (menopause). Some women do not produce eggs if they gain or lose weight very quickly, or if they are too fat or too thin, or if they become ill.



Ovary does not produce an egg.

**3. She has growths (fibroids) in her womb.** Fibroids are tumors that do not cause cancer, but they can cause a miscarriage.



### Infertility in a man

The main causes of infertility in a man are:

1. **He does not produce enough sperm.**
2. **His testicles do not make healthy sperm.** This can happen if he wears tight clothing that press his testicles close to his body, or if he works in a hot area, such as near boilers, furnaces, or engines—especially if he drives for many hours without a break. This can also happen if he sits all day, or sits for a long time in a hot bath before having sex.
3. **He cannot ejaculate** because he has scars in his tubes from a sexually transmitted infection (STI), or he has a spinal cord injury.

### Infertility in both men and women

In both men or women, infertility can be caused by:

1. **Illnesses** such as mumps, diabetes, tuberculosis, and malaria.
2. **Drinking alcohol, smoking or chewing tobacco, or using drugs.**
3. **Malnutrition, too much stress, overwork, or exposure to some chemicals.**



## CREATING A FAMILY THROUGH ADOPTION

Some women with disabilities choose to create families through adoption. A woman may do this because she or her partner are infertile, or she has a health problem that prevents her from giving birth. Or she may decide to adopt a child simply because she believes it is a good way to become a mother and to make a family.

### *How I became a mother*

When I was growing up, like most young girls in the US, I had a dream of finding a partner and having a family. But unlike most other young girls, I didn't believe it would come true. I use a wheelchair to get around, and I had no role models of women who used wheelchairs as parents. I had never been encouraged to think it would be possible for me to have my own family.

When I first met my husband, I was sure he was the right partner for me. He shared my secret dream of making a family through adoption. I knew there were many children who had lost their first family and were waiting for a "forever family." I knew in my heart we could be that family for the right child.

At first, my parents felt it would be unfair to my husband to "burden him with all the child care." They didn't think I could care for a child. Although I was nervous, I knew I had figured out how to do many things that others had said I would never do. I took care of our house, had my own job, and had cared for friends' children in the past. I knew my husband and I could do this!

We had to try several adoption agencies until we found one that supported our plan to become parents. We realized we couldn't change people's prejudices, so if an adoption agency felt our plan would not work, we just went to another agency. After we found a supportive agency, we showed them how well I could parent, rather than what I couldn't do.

Finally we were matched with a child who met our hopes and dreams. She was a wheelchair user, just like me. We were worried that the judge who had to legally approve the adoption might say no because of my disability. But he saw we were a great match and approved our adoption.

I feel honored to guide my daughter through her growing years, and to help her become the lovely and competent person she is now.

—Karen Braitmayer

