

# The Growth Factor

*By Jeff Ives*

## What you need to know about growing UP

All kids wonder how tall—or short—they are going to be one day. Growing taller happens to each person on a different schedule, and it's hard to say what that growth will feel like or how long it will last.

To get some answers, *Current Health* spoke with the former president of the American Academy of Family Physicians, Dr. Ted Epperly. He's been talking with kids and families about growth for more than 25 years. Here are some typical questions he's answered for his patients.

### How tall will I be?

Many formulas are used to predict a child's height. All of them begin by looking at how tall the parents are and how quickly the child is growing. Even though those formulas are fairly accurate, they can also be off by as much as 4 inches.

"It's unusual for a formula to perfectly predict how tall a child will be, but by looking at the parents, you can often get a pretty good idea," says Epperly. It is also possible for a child to outgrow his or her parents, so even the most basic formula can be wrong.

### When will I start growing?

Chances are you're growing right now, but normal growth is nothing compared to a *growth spurt*. That is a period of intense growth that happens when the body releases special hormones that make the bones grow. It's hard to say just when that will start to happen for each person.

"A person's genes are programmed to stimulate growth at different times," says Epperly. Typical growth spurts are 2 to 5 inches each year. The biggest growth spurt Epperly has seen was 12 inches in one year!

While growth spurts vary from person to person, most girls start a growth spurt around age 10 and will see their fastest growth at about age 12. Most boys will start a growth spurt just before age 13 and will grow even faster at 14. Usually people are finished growing by the time they reach their early 20s.

## Do growth spurts hurt?

Sometimes kids complain of growing pains during a growth spurt. A fast period of growth can hurt when there are changes in the tendons that attach muscles to bones. An example of this is a common condition called Osgood-Schlatter. In that condition, "a big bump forms where the quadricep, or the muscle on the front of the thigh, attaches to the shinbone," says Epperly. "When kids grow too fast, it causes pain."

A fast growth spurt can also lead to clumsiness. "All of a sudden if [kids] have too rapid a growth going, it can be hard for kids to control their body," says Epperly. That can result in pain from bumping into things, but good coordination eventually comes back.

## Am I tall enough?

Many kids and families worry about children who seem to be growing too quickly or too slowly. Fortunately, doctors monitor growth for possible health conditions and problems. That's why they mark down your height at each checkup. They compare your growth over time to a chart put out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that shows the normal growth curve.

If a child is growing much faster than the usual growth curve, a health issue may need to be addressed. Today, being overweight, or obese, is a major reason a child might be ahead of his or her age on the growth curve. If that is the case, growth can be slowed with better nutrition and exercise.

If a child is growing too slowly, doctors may look at nutrition as a cause. Lack of proper nutrition can slow normal growth. The child may also have a more serious medical condition that needs to be looked at.

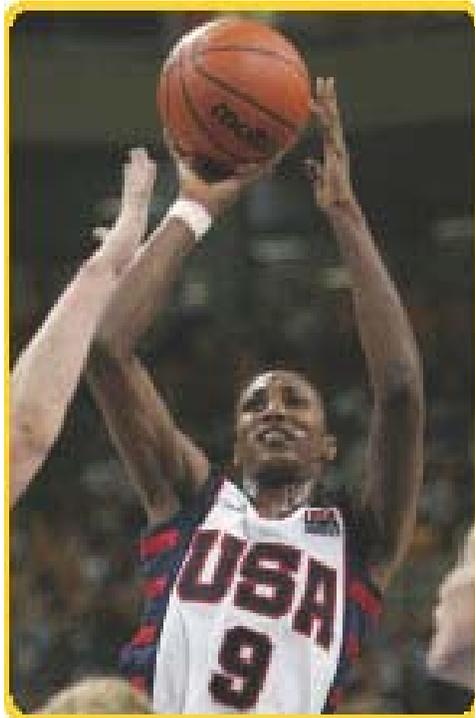
No matter how your body is growing, the most important thing is to learn how to be comfortable with who you are. Even though there are ways to help kids grow faster, such as giving them injections of growth hormones, doctors usually prescribe them only if the child really needs them.

"I actually work with families to try and put their minds at ease," Epperly says. "There's nothing wrong with being below average height." For there to be an "average," he says, half the population is above the average and half the population is below the average.

So whether you end up being tall or short, you're sure to have lots of company!

## The Height Factor

Many people automatically assume that it's good for a man to be tall but awkward for a woman to be tall. These world-class athletes beg to differ.



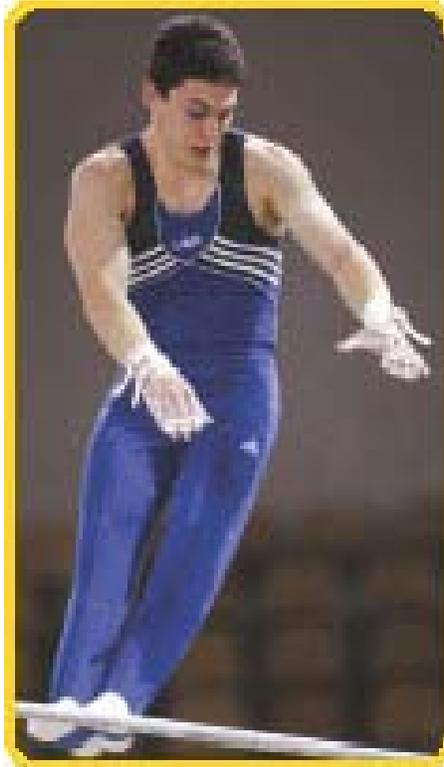
Garrett Ellwood/NBAE/Getty Images

**Lisa Leslie**

**Sport: basketball**

**Height: 6 feet 5 inches**

Superstar WNBA player and Olympic gold medalist Lisa Leslie tells *Current Health* that she was always taller than her classmates. "I didn't feel awkward, because being tall and being smart allowed me to get put into a lot of leadership roles early," she says. She remembers being left in charge of her second-grade classroom when the teacher left the room. But throughout her life, there have been disadvantages. "You stick out so much that people constantly have to make a comment about your height," she says. "That gets tiring, and that still happens today." In the 2008 Olympics, Leslie won her fourth gold medal and retired from the WNBA a year later.

**David Sender**

*Volker Minkus*

**Sport: gymnastics**

**Height: 5 feet 2 inches**

David Sender is one of the best young gymnasts in the United States. He learned to backflip at the age of 6, and he's excelled at gymnastics ever since. Now he's well on his way to being a member of the 2008 U.S. Olympic team after losing the chance in 2008 due to an ankle injury. "I was always—and still am—one of the shortest people in any group I'm in, but it's never hindered me in any way," he told *Current Health*. He says his height is one of the factors that make him a good gymnast. "Since we're constantly flipping ourselves around or lifting ourselves in odd positions, it's usually an advantage to be small." Beyond his success in gymnastics, Sender has also earned a degree in biological sciences from Stanford University.