



# The Prepuce in Italian Art—Evidence from Von Gloeden's Photographs

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## Abstract

It is well known that the portrayal of the male organ in classical art was subject to strict conventions and was not realistic. To what extent did this tradition carry over to the Italian Renaissance? Jewish Old and New Testament figures were not shown as circumcised, but was this a concession to classical convention or a portrayal of the actual, uncircumcised models? The photographs of Wilhelm von Gloeden, taken between 1890 and 1900, provide an invaluable record of young males in pre-industrial Italian society. Comparing these with paintings from the Italian High Renaissance (1450 - 1650) we discover a striking, and hitherto unreported, double standard in which juvenile males were depicted realistically whereas adolescents and adults were portrayed in accordance with classical ideals. This has led to misconceptions about the normal appearance of adult male prepuce which persist to the present day.

## Keywords

Prepuce, Foreskin, Penis, Circumcision, Renaissance Art, Classical Art, Baroque Art

**Subject Areas:** Andrology, Art, Urology

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## 1. Introduction

The modern viewer, looking at Italian religious art, is always puzzled by the fact that Old and New Testament figures are always depicted with foreskins. Isaac, David, St. John and Jesus are among the most popular subjects, and they all appear uncircumcised [1]. It is not as if circumcision was unknown—the Feast of the Circumcision (January 1st) was then a major church festival, and dramatic paintings of the circumcision of Jesus [1] and Isaac [2] were popular. These often involved a huge knife more suggestive of decapitation [2]. Two explanations come to mind, and both are commonly invoked to rationalize the images. One is that the artists were simply depicting accurately the models they used, who naturally at that period were not circumcised. The other is that the artists were following the Graeco-Roman ideal, and therefore depicted their subjects in the way that classical

painters and sculptors had. The initial aim of the present research was to find out, mainly from iconographic evidence, which explanation is correct. This has significance both in furthering our understanding of 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century Italian art, and in correcting misconceptions about the normal appearance of the male organ.

The classical ideal, as has frequently been discussed, required adults to be depicted with a rather juvenile looking penis, small in size and with a prepuce which not only covered the glans, but bunched up in front of it. This has been comprehensively covered by Hodges [3]. We do need to understand that the Graeco-Roman ideal was to some extent the consequence of cultural constraints. In Hellenic and Roman society, men frequently appeared naked, at the baths and at sports and games. Any exposure of the glans penis was regarded as unseemly so men whose prepuce did not provide adequate coverage would either hold it forward with a clip (*fibula*), tie it up with a string which went around the waist (*kynodesme*) or, if neither proved adequate, cover the glans with a cap [4]. (Present day Amerindian peoples of the Amazon basin have exactly the same social taboo, and the use of the *kynodesme* or cap is universal among them [5]). There were depictions on vases of athletes wearing *kynodesme* or *fibula* since that was commonplace in sports but when representing gods or heroes, seeking for an ideal of perfection, the artist had to portray a penis which did not require such aids. This inevitably meant a juvenile penis with an extensive and constricted prepuce. The classical image was therefore enforced by cultural constraints, regardless of what the model actually looked like. (In contrast, in ancient Egypt circumcision was a religious rite, and males were invariably depicted as circumcised [6]).

This leads us to a further question, since classical male subjects such as Cupid, Apollo and Bacchus were just as popular as religious subjects with renaissance artists. These are obviously going to be depicted as uncircumcised, but are these images accurate depictions of their models, or are they modified to conform to the classical ideal? This may seem like an unanswerable question, since photography had not been invented. How could we have any accurate record of what nude men and boys looked like at that period?

Baron Wilhelm (Guillaume) von Gloeden was a German aristocrat who moved to Taormina, Sicily for health reasons around 1877. He became a world famous photographer in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. His output included landscapes, village scenes and female nudes but above all pictures of boys, teenagers and young adult men, both nude and clothed. He left a detailed catalogue of his works which is available online [7] and in recent years there has been an Italian appraisal of his output [8] and a museum exhibition of his works with a detailed *catalogue raisonnée* [9].

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century may seem a long time after the Italian High Renaissance of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, but while northern Italy was industrialising, life in the southern Italian countryside had really not changed at all in those 300 years. We can take, with some confidence, his images as being representative of the subjects who posed for Michelangelo, Donatello, Caravaggio and other great Italian masters. How, then, do they compare?

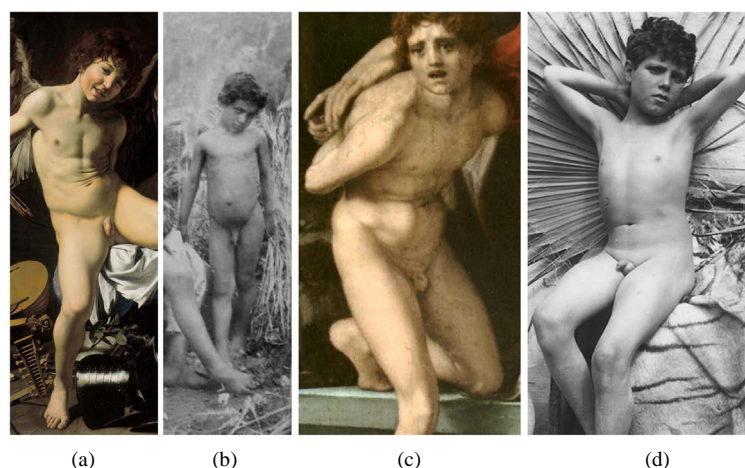
## 2. Results

### 2.1. Pre-Pubertal Boys

The painting “Amor vincit Omnia” by Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi) was his most famous painting in his lifetime. It inspired poetry [10] and was the jewel of the collection of its owner, Vincenzo Giustiniani [11]. It shows a boy, aged 11 or 12, and the secret of its appeal is obvious, the sheer vitality and joy of its depiction (**Figure 1(a)**). This is not a sterile Graeco-Roman ideal figure. It is the boy next door, enjoying himself. The implicit eroticism that has upset later generations—Kenneth Clark described the picture as “repulsive” [12]—was of no concern at the time. More important was the allegorical significance of the composition, including the eagle wings, the crest of the Giustiniani family [13].

We know who the boy was—Cecco di Caravaggio, otherwise Francesco Boneri, Caravaggio’s apprentice and alleged lover, later a painter in his own right. He appeared in many of Caravaggio’s paintings. We also know the owner of the wings, the painter Orazio Gentileschi, who lent them for the occasion [10].

The painting is so far from the classical ideal that we would be inclined to expect it to be realistic. The boy is quite well endowed for his age, with a full foreskin bunching in front of a large glans penis. Maybe Caravaggio exaggerated this a bit for effect? Maybe not, if you look at von Gloeden. **Figure 1(b)** shows a boy, from a group of 3, who appears to be aged about 10. There are several pictures of these boys, sometimes 3 sometimes 4, at the same location and time. In some the young boy is playing a rustic flute. He is at least as well-endowed as Cecco, and has a very similar penis and prepuce, not to mention similar curly hair. Both would probably be placed at Tanner stage 2 [14] (see **Appendix**).



**Figure 1.** Prepubertal boys. (a) Michaelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Amor vincit Omnia* (detail), 1602. (b) Wilhelm von Gloeden, *Timbrata* (detail), c. 1890 (cat. no. 0071, *Auch ich in Arkadien* no. 74). (c) Andrea del Sarto, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (or *The sacrifice of Abraham*), c. 1527 (detail). (d) Wilhelm von Gloeden, untitled, young boy (detail), pre 1893. (cat. no. 0113, *Auchich in Arkadien* no. 138)

The Isaac of Andrea del Sarto (**Figure 1(c)**) could not be in greater contrast. Physically, he is well developed and must be at least 11 years old, but his penis is tiny, probably still Tanner stage 1 [14]. He is not, of course, shown as circumcised, even though he, if anyone, should be, as the first Jewish boy born after Abraham's adoption of the covenant of circumcision. The shrunken penis may be part of the artist's way of depicting how terrified the boy was, a message which comes across very strongly. Nevertheless, we have all known boys—late developers—who looked like this. So did von Gloeden, as we see in **Figure 1(d)**.

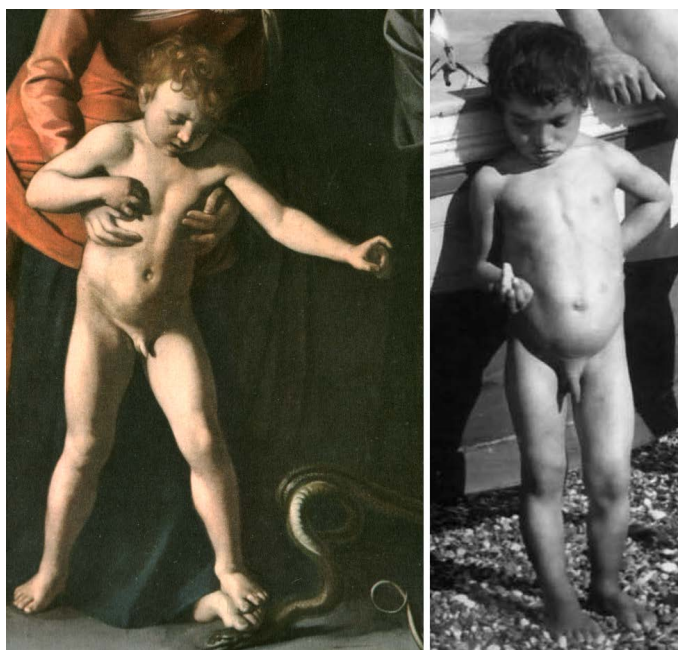
Caravaggio's young Jesus (from *Virgin and Child with St Anne*) shows a much younger boy, whose blonde hair is surely almost as incongruous as his uncircumcised penis (**Figure 2(a)**). That penis has a foreskin which tapers rather than bunches, and again von Gloeden captured a similar one (**Figure 2(b)**).

This brings us to another legendary work, Donatello's David of c.1440 (**Figure 3**). This was one of the first large male nude statues of the Renaissance, and also reputedly the first self-supporting solo bronze statue cast since antiquity. The biblical David was a young boy, and Donatello's androgynous figure is much truer to that image than is Michelangelo's more famous marble statue. It shows a boy of 13 or 14, on the cusp of puberty, but as yet with no pubic hair. His penis is still small, but the foreskin is short, and does not seem to quite cover the glans. There is certainly no excess foreskin. His penis is probably at Tanner stage 3, or even 4. The Tanner stages of pubic hair and penile development were never intended to be regarded as occurring in lockstep; a large proportion of boys reach stage 4 without pubic hair [14], though one could also suspect that Donatello omitted pubic hair to allow himself the freedom to depict the boy realistically. Similar prepuces can be seen on some of von Gloeden's adolescents (below). It is quite unlike the stylised penis of antiquity, and is the only case known to the author of a penis being depicted without a bunch of skin in front of the glans.

What this brief survey has shown is that in representing boys up to Tanner stages 3 or 4 there is no evidence of any attempt to present a stereotyped view of the male organ. The painters and sculptors of the Italian renaissance, over a period of some 200 years, represented the boys as they were. And they were very similar to the boys who were found in the Italian countryside 300 years later.

## 2.2. Adolescents and Adults

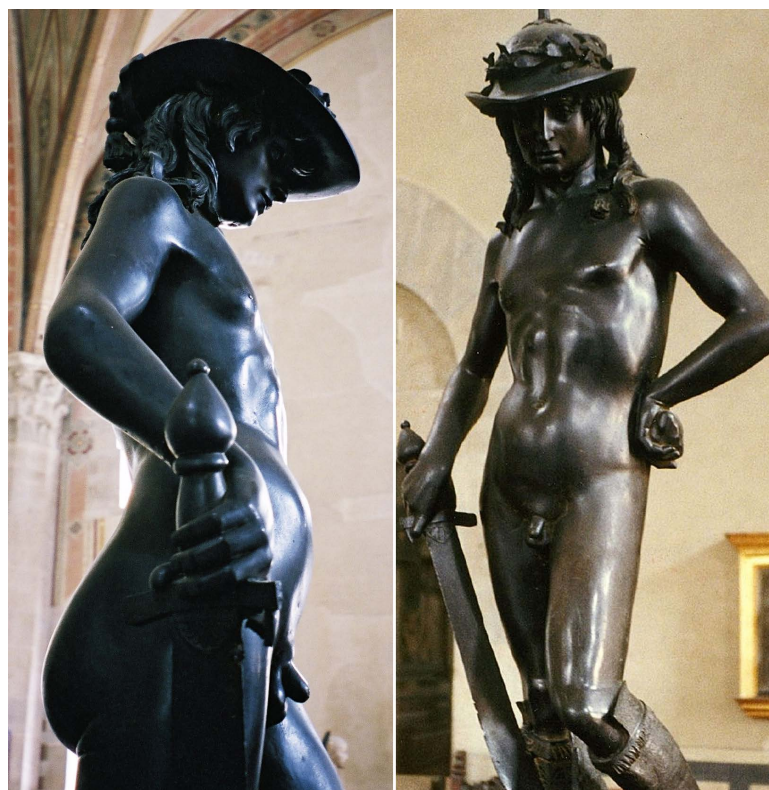
The David of Michelangelo Buonarroti shows an adolescent of 16 or 17 years old [15]. He is completely naked, as the Bible describes, without the hat and boots that Donatello gave him. But he is no longer a boy—more a youth in his prime. He has a neat, if stylized, bush of pubic hair. His penis, however (**Figure 4(b)**) has the juvenile look of antiquity, with a long-bunched-up foreskin. Michelangelo was a prolific portrayer of the male nude, and we see the exact same juvenile penis everywhere—in *Day* where we are looking at a middle-aged adult [15], in *Victory* (*The Victor and the Vanquished*) [15], where it is flipped to the side by the violence of the action



(a)

(b)

**Figure 2.** (a) Michaelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Madonna and Child with St. Anne* (the Pala-frenieri Madonna) (detail) 1605-1606; (b) Wilhelm von Gloeden, *untitled (fishermen and boys on beach, detail)* probably c 1900. (cat. no.1354, Auchich in Arkadien no. 185).

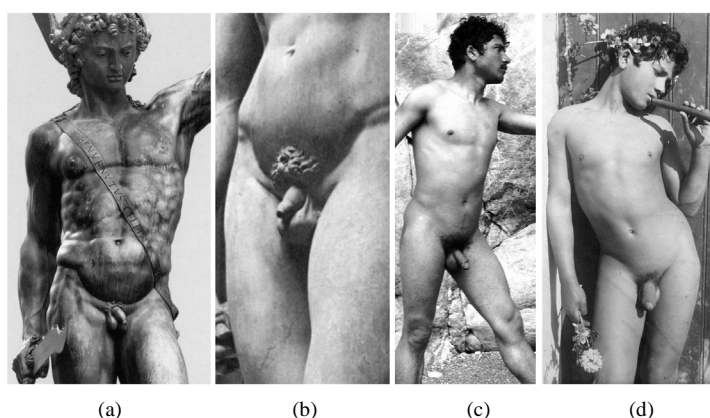


(a)

(b)

**Figure 3.** David, bronze sculpture by Donatello (Donato di Niccolò di BettoBardi), c. 1440 (a) side view, (detail); (b) frontal view (detail).





**Figure 4.** Young men and adolescents. (a) Benvenuto Cellini, Perseus with the head of Medusa, bronze, 1545-1554 (detail); (b) David, marble sculpture by Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1501-1504 (detail); (c) Adult, similar in age to the man depicted as Perseus, but with a much larger penis. The prepuce just protrudes over the rim of the glans. Wilhelm von Gloeden, untitled, cat 1055, c. 1898; (d) Wilhelm von Gloeden, Gaetano, cat. no. 0347, c. 1895. A young adolescent, probably younger than Michelangelo's model, but with a full-sized penis and a prepuce which covers only half the glans.

and in the Risen Christ (in the only extant photograph with the added draperies removed [15]). We see it in paint, too, in the Creation of Adam and other Sistine Chapel paintings. But this was not just a foible of Michelangelo's, it was universal. See, for example, Benvenuto Cellini's Perseus, made some 40 years after David (**Figure 4(a)**)—a muscular, fit man with a distinctly small penis and what looks like a phimotic prepuce. Or, in paint, there is Perugino's Apollo and Marsyas—wherever you see an adult penis in Italian art from 1440 to 1640, there is (almost) always just one penis you will see.

The art historian Marilyn Lavin has discovered a few cases where men are given better-sized organs [16], though still with all-enveloping foreskins, but in every case they depict sinners being punished. Possibly the full-sized penis was intended to indicate libidinousness, or perhaps the artists felt less constrained by convention when portraying sinners—Lavin does not pursue this question. More startling is her claim that in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting "The Drunkenness of Noah" (Figure 1 of her paper) one of the sons of Noah is shown to be circumcised. If true, this would be extraordinary, since Noah and his sons long predate the Jewish covenant of circumcision. Lavin explains this by identifying the figure as Shem, biblically the patriarch of the Semitic (circumcised) peoples, so this becomes an allegorical allusion. However, the figure in question is the only one of Noah's sons without pubic hair, which means he must be the youngest, Ham, not Shem, and the penis ends with the nozzle of a foreskin, not the bare meatus of a circumcised organ. The shape of the glans is revealed through the foreskin, just as it is in Caravaggio's Amor (**Figure 1(a)**). By depicting Ham without pubic hair Michelangelo gave himself the liberty to paint him as a boy, that is realistically, rather than following the adult convention. Noah, Shem and Japheth all have the classical small, covered member.

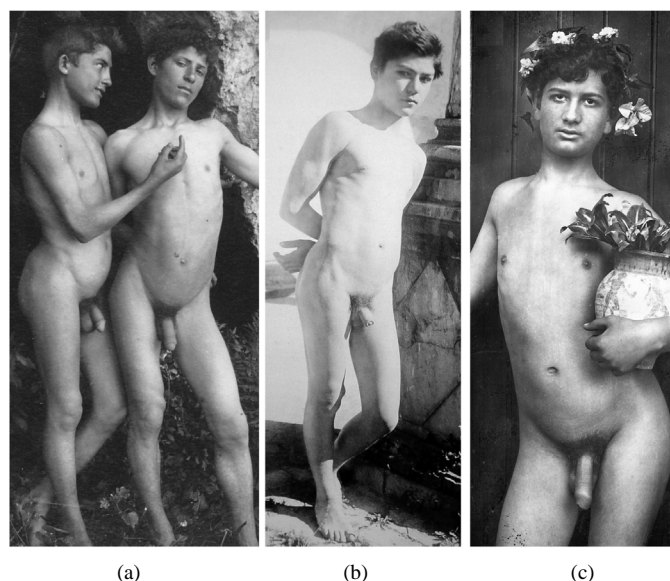
Could these diminutive, hooded, penises reflect the reality of the artists' models? It seems implausible—we are accustomed to adult penises in which the glans penis is not fully covered [6]. Chartham [17] reported a survey of 2500 uncircumcised men in which only 45% had had the glans covered in the flaccid state, 32% had the glans half-covered, and 23% had a fully exposed glans. In another survey of his own [17] of 100 uncircumcised men, only 27 had foreskins which were capable of covering the glans, and 18 of them wore it permanently retracted, so only 9% presented with a covered glans, though 27% could have covered it at the artist's request. A study of young British soldiers [18] showed that 58% of uncircumcised men had a foreskin the author regarded as "normal"—i.e. not fully covering the glans. However, these figures refer to mid 20th century UK, where many men were circumcised, and cultural norms were very different from ancient Rome. How much they differed from renaissance Italy is the important question.

Von Gloeden's models were living in a countryside and lifestyle unchanged from the Italy of previous centuries. The railway had just arrived at Taormina, and played a part in its development as a tourist destination for wealthy foreigners—largely driven by the fame of von Gloeden's photographs—but had no relevance at that time to the local way of life. Two of von Gloeden's models, an adolescent and an adult are, clearly, circumcised

and therefore excluded from the comparison. The adult is obviously North African, and the teenager may also be a Muslim from across the Mediterranean. Von Gloeden frequently visited Egypt, and often wore Egyptian dress, but it is also possible that he might have arranged a circumcision for a boy with phimosis. Circumcision was already routine in the USA at this date [6]. A representative gallery of uncircumcised adolescents and young adults is shown in **Figure 5**. Almost all are much more handsomely endowed than the Renaissance figures. Two, an adult (**Figure 5(a)**) and an adolescent at Tanner stage 4 or 5, (**Figure 5(c)**, left figure) have the glans penis fully exposed. Three have it partly exposed—the youngest, a very early teenager at Tanner stage 3 (**Figure 5(b)**), has almost half the glans uncovered, an older youth at Tanner stage 4 (**Figure 5(c)**, right figure) has rather more exposed. Another youth, at Tanner stage 3 in his early teens, has a prepuce which nearly covers the glans (**Figure 5(d)**), like Donatello's David. Only one young man has a covered glans (**Figure 5(e)**) and even that bears no resemblance to the classic ideal, the prepuce being lax and not protruding in front of the glans. Looking at von Gloeden's output overall, no more than 20% of males at Tanner scale 3 or above have a fully covered glans. This corresponds reasonably closely to Chartham's [17] and Osmond's [18] results, and not at all to the classical ideal.

If the correspondence between von Gloeden's younger boys and their Renaissance counterparts had not been so close, one might try to find other explanations, but in reality we have to accept that the models employed by Renaissance painters and sculptors probably looked in life very much like those photographed by von Gloeden, with large penises and prepuces which in most cases did not fully cover the glans penis. In portraying young boys the artists could be realistic, but once they showed post-pubertal subjects they felt bound by the Graeco-Roman ideal. They saw a large penis with much of the glans exposed, but drew or carved a small, covered organ with an extensive, constricted prepuce.

How does this relate to contemporary urology? The answer is that these statues and paintings have led many people to believe that artistic depictions of human genitalia reflect reality. Up until the 20th century females were portrayed without pubic hair. The story of how John Ruskin was unable to consummate his marriage when he encountered his wife's pubic hair is well known. A letter to his father shows that even then he could not disbelieve to classical ideal, and thought that his wife (Effie Gray) was a freak! The reply is not preserved but one imagines that Ruskin's father, who was a man of the world, put his son straight on this, since Ruskin did not marry again after the annulment of his marriage to Effie. (Effie subsequently married the artist Sir John Everett Millais and bore him 8 children).



**Figure 5.** Adult and adolescent males from von Gloeden. (a) Untitled, cat. no. 1899, c 1900. Two adolescents, one with the glans uncovered, the other with partial coverage; (b) Untitled, Sicilia Mitica Arcadia no. 52. Adolescent with the glans nearly completely covered—cf. Donatello's David, Figure 3; (c) Untitled, cat. no. 1039, c 1898. A well-endowed young man with a fully covered glans, which still bears no resemblance to the classical ideal.

The equally unrealistic depiction of male genitalia seems to have played a major part in modern-day campaigns against circumcision. Most of these campaigners are men circumcised in infancy, or the female partners of such men, who simply have no idea of what an actual, adult, uncircumcised penis looks like. Their propaganda typically takes it as a given that a foreskin is only retracted during intromission whereas in fact the adult glans is most often not fully covered, and is totally bared on erection. Had Christian art portrayed men realistically (and indeed portrayed biblical figures as circumcised) the whole debate would probably not exist.

### 3. Conclusions

This survey has revealed a hitherto undescribed double standard in Italian Renaissance and Baroque art. Younger boys, right up to the onset of puberty, were portrayed realistically. No attempt was made to conform to Graeco-Roman ideals nor, in religious art, to the realities of Judaism; the boys were shown just as they were. Once the subject showed a post-pubertal male, however, an entirely different aesthetic took hold. The old Graeco-Roman taboo about an exposed glans still echoed down the ages. Not only was there still no public depiction of the fact that Jews were circumcised, the conflict between the model in front of the artist and the classical ideal became too great to ignore and the classical ideal won out every time.

Future study, on the artistic side, could extend this approach to the other great European artistic traditions, which were unlikely to be quite so closely bound to the classical convention. On the andrology side, it would be very interesting to find out how many circumcised Americans and Australians have misconceptions about the appearance of the adult uncircumcised member, and whether this has influenced the anti-circumcision movement in those countries.

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## Appendix—The Tanner Stages

British physician JM Tanner [14] described five stages of the development of puberty in boys and girls. For convenience, the stages in boys are described and illustrated here. Two important points need to be noted:

1) These stages cannot be used to identify the age of a boy depicted in an image—the range of variation in age for each stage is wide.

2) The development of penis and pubic hair do not take place in step—a boy can often be at stage 3 or 4 in penis development and still at stage 2 for pubic hair.

**Stage 1.** Juvenile. Age range 0 - 14, but typically up to age 9. Testicle volume less than 1.5 ml, penis 1 - 3 cm in length. No pubic hair.

**Stage 2.** Age range 9 - 15, but typically 9 - 11. Testicle volume up to 6 ml, scrotum enlarges and reddens, penis length little changed, minimal straight pubic hair.

**Stage 3.** Age range 10 - 16, but typically 11 - 13. Testicle volume 6 - 12 ml, scrotum enlarges further, penis length up to 6 cm but girth only slightly enlarged, pubic hair begins to become coarse and curly.

**Stage 4.** Age range 12 - 16 but typically 13 - 14. Testicle volume 12 - 20 ml, scrotum enlarges and darkens, penis length up to 10 cm, girth increased, pubic hair adult in form but not in extent.

**Stage 5.** Adult. Age range 12 - 17 but typically 15 - 16. Testicle volume 25 ml, adult scrotum and penis (c. 15 cm), pubic hair adult in form and distribution.

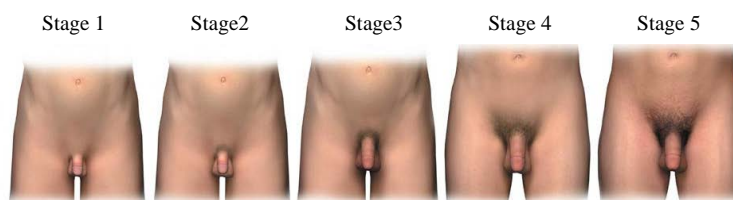


Figure A1. The tanner stages in boys.



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