Do his ears hang low? Are your grandfather’s ears bigger than your dad’s? European scientists noticed that older people’s ears seem bigger than those of younger adults. To confirm their suspicions, they measured ears on people of all ages. It turns out that human ears actually keep growing throughout our lifetimes! But why would ears continue to grow when the rest of the body stops? The answer lies in the difference between long bones (like arm and leg bones) and the cartilage that shapes and supports our ears. Long bones have growth plates at each end that add bone in response to hormones our bodies make in large quantities when we are young and growing fast. These plates stop adding bone after puberty, when hormone production slows and we’ve reached our full height. Ear cartilage lacks growth plates, and it continues to grow—and so do our ears, even when we’re old.

—Jenifer Lienau Thompson

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