



0. Stages of a Monarch Butterfly's Life - Story Preface

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Monarch butterflies change form as they grow. This process is called metamorphosis and covers four stages from egg to larva (caterpillar), to pupa and, finally, to adult butterfly. This process takes thirty days.

The first state, the egg, lasts just a few days. The female Monarch lays an egg on a milkweed plant, then moves to another plant or leaf. Adult females lay an estimated 100 to 300 eggs. On the fourth day, the eggs hatch. The eggs are very small, about the size of a pencil point.

The next stage is the larva. This stage lasts between ten days to two weeks. After hatching, the larvae eat their eggshell homes and move onto the milkweed where their eggs were laid. They eat and eat and eat. They eat so much that they start getting too large for their skin, so they shed it. This process—when a Monarch, in caterpillar form, crawls out of its skin—is called molting.

After the caterpillar's new skin dries, it ... are you ready for this?? ... eats its old skin. Have a [look at these pictures](#).

The time-span, between the caterpillar's molts, is called instars. The Monarch caterpillar sheds its skin—or, its exoskeleton—five times. It has to shed its skin because, unlike human beings, the skin of a Monarch caterpillar does not stretch.

The National Wildlife Federation has a series of pictures depicting [each stage of the Monarch's metamorphosis](#). They are pretty amazing!

The size of the caterpillar's body changes from a first-stage length (measuring between 2mm and 6mm) to a second-second instar (where it grows from about 6mm to 9mm). At the third-instar, the caterpillar expands from 10mm to 14mm and the fourth instar sees the caterpillar lengthen between 13mm and 25mm. By the last instar, or the fifth stage of molting, the caterpillar's length is between 25mm to 45mm.

After five instars, the Monarch reaches the Pupa stage. It can take some doing for the Monarch caterpillar to stuff its body into the chrysalis!

This last stage continues between ten days and two weeks. During this pupal stage, while the Monarch goes through its final transformation, it has no defense against predators so—with Mother Nature's help—they are sometimes very hard to see.

Emerging from the pupal stage, the Monarch is an adult butterfly. It will mate, and the process starts all over again.

Instinctively, Monarchs know where their predecessors were born; they return to this location for years to come. Interestingly, milkweed plants contain a poisonous toxin. The Monarchs store this in their bodies, and it makes them taste terrible to birds and other predators.

We could say this toxin provides these beautiful butterflies with their own unique protection system.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

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Monarch eggs

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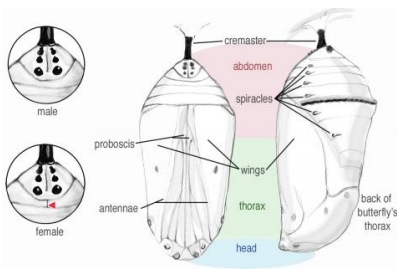


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