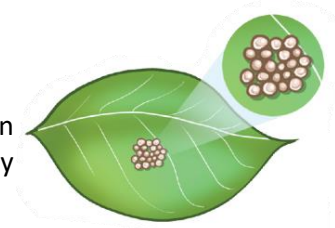


The life cycle of a butterfly

We all know butterflies for their beautiful, symmetrical wings but did you know they start off life as something completely different? These remarkable creatures transform in a process called metamorphosis, which is when an insect or amphibian physically develops from an immature form to an adult form. There are four incredible and necessary stages in the life cycle of a butterfly.

Stage one: The egg

The life cycle of a butterfly begins when a female butterfly lays her tiny eggs on plants. Often, the eggs are laid on the underside of leaves, where they will be safe from predators. Many eggs (between 100 and 300 on average) are laid at once to increase the chances of survival. Most species of butterfly eggs take between three and six days to hatch.



Stage two: The caterpillar

Once the caterpillar is ready, it will hatch out of the egg. The primary aim of the new-born caterpillar is to eat. As soon as it hatches, it will start eating the plant it is on before moving on to other nearby plants. Consequently, the caterpillar grows rapidly and soon becomes too large for its skin. As a result, this becomes extremely tight and then splits to reveal a new skin underneath.

This process is repeated four or five times as the caterpillar grows. During this important phase, caterpillars can grow up to one hundred times larger. Growing rapidly is part of a caterpillar's survival strategy because, at this stage of their life cycle, they are extremely vulnerable to predators. In order to have the best chance of survival, they need to reach the next stage (pupation) as quickly as possible.



Stage three: The pupa

When the caterpillar is fully grown, it transforms itself into a pupa. The pupa will usually be attached beneath a leaf or branch and shed its skin one last time to expose the chrysalis - also known as a pupa shell - underneath. Whilst the caterpillar is inside the chrysalis, marvellous changes are happening. The caterpillar changes into a butterfly through the process of metamorphosis. Most butterflies emerge from their chrysalises in about ten to fourteen days, however, this duration varies depending on the species and the temperature of the environment.



Stage four: The butterfly

As soon as the butterfly is ready to emerge, the chrysalis splits open. The butterfly has to wait between thirty minutes and two hours for its wings to dry before it can fly. The new butterfly will live for around two weeks. During this time, it has a few very important jobs: find its food source from plants and flowers, search for a mate and choose a suitable plant to lay its eggs on. Once the eggs are laid, the whole life cycle begins again.

