



Intersex 101: Everything You Need to Know

“Intersex” refers to people who are born with any of a range of biological sex characteristics that may not fit typical notions about male or female bodies.

Variations may be in their chromosomes, genitals, or internal organs like testes or ovaries. Some intersex traits are identified at birth, while others may not be discovered until puberty or later in life. People with intersex traits have always existed, but there is more awareness now about the diversity of human bodies. People with intersex bodies, like anyone who may be seen as different, sometimes face discrimination, including in healthcare settings (as early as infancy).

People who are intersex are more common than you think! Experts estimate that as many as 1.7% of people are born with intersex traits – about the same number who are born with red hair. People with intersex traits aren’t all the same, and some people may not even know they are intersex without genetic testing (this may happen, for example, with athletes). Intersex people are not that uncommon — they just have been mostly invisible. But that is changing.

Intersex children are at risk for medically unnecessary interventions and surgeries without their consent.

For many years, medicine has viewed babies born with atypical sex characteristics as needing to be “fixed.” As many as 1 in 2000 are faced with unnecessary medical intervention at an early age – extensive, involuntary surgeries for no other reason than to make their bodies conform to traditional notions of what it means to be male or female. **The vast majority of surgeries are not medically necessary when performed on young children and could instead be delayed until the individual can decide whether surgery is wanted.** Some intersex people grow up without ever knowing about the procedures they underwent as children. Others report being told that surgery was necessary, only to find out later that this was not true.

These medical interventions often cause physical and psychological harm.

Evidence is increasingly showing the harms of surgeries performed without informed consent, which include pain, loss of sensitivity, scarring, and even sterilization, as well as psychological consequences like PTSD and the risk that the sex assigned will not match one’s gender identity. **Because of these risks, intersex genital surgeries are now considered human rights abuses** by groups like the United Nations, the World Health Organization, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBT Equality. However, such procedures are not directly addressed by any law in the United States. They are still performed by a small group of specialists across the country.

Intersex youth and adults today talk about the consequences suffered as a result of unwanted surgeries, including depression, anxiety, and issues with trust and intimacy in relationships. **While parents and doctors may act with the best intentions, rushing to "fix" an intersex child's bodily difference most often does much more harm than good.** Unfortunately, parents may feel pressured into making irreversible decisions about their children's bodies before the child can choose what, if any, medical procedures they desire.

Most people think biological sex is either "male" or "female," but it is more complicated. This misunderstanding makes intersex people feel alone and unnecessarily ashamed of their bodies.

Don't make assumptions – let intersex people share their own stories.

If you meet someone who is intersex, let them share the information they wish to share. Don't ask about their bodies or what procedures they've undergone. Respect their privacy.

Intersex is different from gender or sexual orientation. Like anyone, intersex people can have any orientation or identity.

Intersex people, like all people, may identify as male, female, with no gender, or with multiple genders—and they may express their gender in different ways. Similarly, intersex people may be straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, or identify in another way. Some (but not all) intersex people use pronouns other than "he" or "she," like "they" or "zie." Always allow intersex people, just like anyone else, to identify what pronouns they'd like you to use.

Being intersex is not the same as being transgender.

A person who is intersex was born with one or more variations in their sex characteristics; a transgender person has a different gender than they were assumed to be at birth, but their visible sex characteristics at birth usually fit within what most people think of as typical male or female bodies. Intersex and transgender people may face similar barriers to accessing appropriate medical care and may experience similar discrimination based on their gender identity and expression. Both communities have a shared interest in autonomy and grapple with the loss of decision-making authority over their own bodies.

While intersex individuals are frequently forced to undergo unwanted and unnecessary surgeries during infancy and childhood, transgender individuals are often denied necessary medical treatment in adolescence and beyond. Transgender people may also be required to undergo surgery they *don't* want in order to update the gender marker on their identity documents.

By better understanding the similarities and differences between these communities, we can be better allies to both!