



Frequently asked questions: Intersex identities

What does intersex mean?

Intersex describes people's bodies that do not fit invented categories of "male sex" and "female sex." There is no single "intersex body"; the term encompasses a wide variety of conditions that do not have anything in common except that they are deemed "abnormal" by the medical community. What makes intersex people similar is their experiences of medicalization, not anatomy.

Generally speaking, intersex is not an identity category. While some intersex people do reclaim "intersex" as part of their identity, most regard it as a medical condition or just a unique physical quality. Intersex people may be straight, cis, or any of the identities in the LGBTQ umbrella.

What do intersex activists want?

In general, intersex activists are working to replace the current model of intersex treatment based on concealment with a patient-centered alternative. This includes ending coercive "corrective" surgery of intersex infants, respect for all bodies, and healthcare based on consent and patients' desired outcomes.

Are intersex conditions harmful?

Most intersex conditions do not cause illness or pain. Some intersex conditions are associated with conditions requiring medical treatment. However, surgically "correcting" the appearance of intersex genitals does not change these underlying medical needs.

How common are intersex conditions?

It's difficult to say exactly how many children are born with intersex conditions because of the secrecy and deception surrounding it, and also because there are no concrete boundaries to the

definition of "intersex." It is estimated that about one in 2,000 children are born intersex, to which healthcare providers often respond with discriminatory and nonconsensual intervention.

How do you know a person's "true sex"?

Medicine cannot determine a person's "true sex" because of the many variations and combinations that occur in chromosomes, hormones, reproductive systems, and genitalia. Additionally, bodies do not determine gender. Although some make a distinction between "sex" and "gender," both are socially constructed. In other words: science can measure how large a clitoris is, but not the significance of that measurement. That is a social interpretation.

How do you know an intersex person's gender?

We don't know a person's gender until they are old enough to communicate it to us. We recommend that a person be given as much opportunity as possible to determine their gender for themselves. Some children may choose to undergo hormone suppression until they are able to make further decisions about their body and their gender.

What are the correct pronouns for intersex people?

Pronouns are not based on a person's body, but on what they prefer to be called. Do not call an intersex person "it": this is dehumanizing.

Are intersex people a "third gender"?

Many people with intersex conditions are women and men. Some identify with non-binary genders. There are some who identify as an alternative gender, like some non-intersex





people do. While we support everyone's right to define their own identities, people with intersex conditions should not be expected to be gender-nonconforming just because of their bodies.

Is intersex part of the trans umbrella?

While some people with intersex conditions also identify as transgender, intersex people as a group have a unique set of needs and priorities beyond those shared with trans people. Often these unique needs are made invisible or secondary when "intersex" becomes only a subcategory of "trans."

For example, people who talk about intersex issues only in the context of trans issues often stress the risk of assigning a "wrong" gender as an argument against "corrective" surgeries. While this is a valid concern, it overlooks the fact that coercive intervention is unjust whether or not one's gender identity is their gender assigned at birth. It is for this reason that many prefer to have "intersex" spelled out explicitly rather than consider it within the trans umbrella.

What is the difference between "hermaphrodite" and "intersex"?

In animal science, "hermaphrodite" means an organism that has reproductive organs interpreted as both "male" and "female" (such as snails and earthworms). In humans, there are no actual "hermaphrodites" in this sense, although doctors have called people with intersex conditions "hermaphrodites" because intersex bodies do not neatly conform to what doctors define as "male" or "female" bodies.

The word "hermaphrodite" is misleading, mythologizing, and stigmatizing. Although some

intersex activists do reclaim and use this term to describe themselves, it is not an appropriate term to refer to intersex people in general. In short, snails are hermaphrodites; humans are not.

Also, please avoid using the word "intersexual" as a noun; we prefer "intersex people" or "people with intersex conditions/experiences."

How can I support intersex people?

You can help by talking to your friends and family members about what intersex really means. The more people are aware of intersex issues, the less likely they will accept surgery and silence as the only option when they or someone they know have an intersex child.

If someone tells you about their intersex status, make sure to respect their name and gender identity as well as their privacy. Ask what they need from you, if anything, and learn more about intersex issues so you can be as supportive as possible.

Where can I find more about the intersex movement?

Intersex Society of North America

www.isna.org

Intersex Initiative

www.intersexinitiative.org

Bodies Like Ours

www.bodieslikeours.org

Pidgeon Pagonis

www.pidgeonismy.name

Check out the UW-Madison library database under keyword "Intersex" for a variety of books, articles, and anthologies with more perspectives.

Adapted from "Intersex FAQ." Intersex Initiative. June 28, 2008. Intersexinitiative.org/articles/intersex-faq.html.

