

What is being intersex?

Intersex people are born with external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, and/or endocrine systems that are different from most other people. 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 state. Most intersex people identify and live as ordinary men and women, and may be straight or LGBTQ.

Technically, intersex is defined as "congenital anomaly of the reproductive and sexual system." Intersex conditions are also known as "disorders of sex development" (DSD) in the medical community.

What do intersex activists want?

Activists are working to replace the current model of intersex treatment based on concealment with a patient-centered alternative. They are not suggesting that intersex babies are better off left alone; they want there to be social and psychological support for both the parents and intersex children so that they can deal with social difficulties resulting from being different than others.

In the long-term, they hope to remove those social barriers through education and raising awareness.

Are intersex conditions harmful?

In general, intersex conditions do not cause the person to feel sickness or pain. However, some intersex conditions are associated with serious health issues, which need to be treated medically. However, surgically "correcting" the appearance of intersex genitals will not change these underlying medical needs.

How common are intersex conditions?

No one knows 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, or five children per day in the United States, are born visibly intersex, which prompts early (and often misguided) intervention.

Can't they just do a test to find out babies' true sex?

Medicine cannot determine the baby's "true sex" because of the many biological variations that occur in chromosomes, hormones, and internal/external genitalia. Additionally, bodies do not necessarily dictate gender identity. In other words: science can measure how large a clitoris is, but cannot conclude how large or small it needs to be. That is a societal determination.

How do we know the correct gender of a child with an intersex condition?

We won't know the child's gender until they are old enough to communicate it to us. We recommend that the child be assigned a gender based on the best prediction, and allow them to determine for themselves once they are old enough to do so. Irreversible surgeries on infants should be avoided to give them the widest range of choices when they are older. Performing surgeries will not eliminate the possibility that the prediction turns out to be wrong.

What are the correct pronouns for intersex people?

Pronouns should not be based on the shape of one's genitalia, but on what the person prefers to be called. For children too young to communicate what their preferences are, go with the gender assignment parents and doctor agreed on based on their best prediction. Do not call intersex children "it:" this is dehumanizing.

Are intersex people a "third gender"?

Many people with intersex conditions identify solidly as a man or as a woman, like many non-intersex people. 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, we do not believe that people with intersex conditions should be expected to be gender-transgressive just because of their physical condition.

Is intersex part of the transgender community?

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. Too often, these unique needs are made invisible or secondary when "intersex" becomes a subcategory of "transgender."

For example, people who talk about intersex in the context of transgender often stress the risk of assigning a "wrong" gender as an argument against intersex genital surgeries. While this is a valid concern, it overlooks the fact that intersex medical treatment is painful and traumatic whether or not one's gender identity happens to match their assigned gender.

It is for this reason that we prefer to have "intersex" spelled out explicitly rather than have it "included" under the trans umbrella.

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

In biology, "hermaphrodite" means an organism that has both "male" and "female" sets of reproductive organs (like 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 typical 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 be an ally?

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

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 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

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.