

## INTERSEX FACTS!

It is impossible to know the gender of an intersex newborn. (Many would say it's impossible to know for certain the gender of any newborn.) Usually children born with intersex conditions are given a "best guess" gender and are raised as such. Intersex activists advocate that if a child later presents as a different gender, they should be allowed to switch from their official designation. Others come to identify their gender as somewhere in-between, and many others stick with the gender assigned them at birth.

"Disorders of sex development" is the new preferred term in the American medical community used to describe intersex conditions. Some intersex activists worked with American medical professionals in favor of this change, in order to differentiate intersex conditions from the intersex identity. Most activists, however, find the term degrading, saying that the word 'disorder' further stigmatizes people with intersex conditions. Others believe that their intersex condition is not a disorder, but a natural difference along the spectrum of sex.

Scientifically speaking, a hermaphrodite is a plant or animal with reproductive organs of both sexes. While the term has previously been used to refer to intersex people, most intersex activists now find it derogatory and stigmatizing. 'Intersex' is now the preferred term. Some intersex people have 'reclaimed' the word 'hermaphrodite' or 'herm' and use it to describe themselves, but non-intersex people should not do so without permission.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

### BODIES LIKE OURS

[HTTP://WWW.BODIESLIKEOURS.ORG/](http://www.bodieslikeours.org/)

### GENDERS IN X (FORUMS)

[HTTP://WWW.GENDERSINX.ORG/](http://www.gendersinx.org/)

### INTERSEX COLLECTIVE

[HTTP://WWW.INTERSEXCOLLECTIVE.ORG/](http://www.intersexcollective.org/)

### INTERSEX INITIATIVE

[HTTP://WWW.IPDX.ORG/](http://www.ipdx.org/)

### MRKH ORGANIZATION

[HTTP://WWW.MRKH.ORG/](http://www.mrkh.org/)

## PRINTED RESOURCES

### INTERSEX IN THE AGE OF ETHICS

*by Alice Dreger*

### HERMAPHRODITES AND THE MEDICAL INVENTION OF SEX

*by Alice Dreger*

### INTERSEX AND IDENTITY

*by Sharon Preves*

### SEXING THE BODY

*by Anne Fausto-Sterling*

### LESSONS FROM THE INTERSEXED

*by Suzanne Kessler*



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# INTERSEX 101



## TRANSCENDING BOUNDARIES

GUIDE TO  
INTERSEX

*by*  
*Lisa Jacobs*

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## **WHAT IS INTERSEX?**

Various groups define intersex in different ways, but as a general definition, intersex people are born with external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, and/or endocrine systems that are different from most other people. Others restrict the definition only to include people with certain conditions, medically termed “disorders of sex development”, where chromosomal sex does not match phenotypic (visibly apparent) sex, or phenotypic sex cannot be determined. The term ‘intersex’ encompasses a wide variety of conditions and body types that do not have anything in common except that they are deemed “abnormal” by society. Most intersex people identify as men or women, just like everybody else, although some identify as a third or different sex, as intersex, or a combination thereof.

## **HOW COMMON ARE INTERSEX CONDITIONS?**

That depends on the definition of intersex one uses. According to the most restrictive definition, prevalence is .018%, or approximately 18 per ten thousand births. Wider definitions, more often used among intersex activists, place the prevalence of intersex around 1%, or even as high as 4%.

## **WHAT DO INTERSEX ACTIVISTS WANT?**

One of the main concerns of intersex activists is to transition from concealment-based treatments of intersex infants to one that is patient-centered. Often, intersex children are subjected to medically unnecessary procedures and surgeries in order to make their genitals appear normal. The child is then often raised without any idea of their intersex condition. Some of these surgeries create children with genitals different than their eventual gender, prompting sexual reassignment surgery which could otherwise have been avoided. Many surgeries and procedures

are also experienced as sexually and/or psychologically abusive by intersex children, especially those used for research purposes or requiring sexually invasive treatments. Intersex activists now advocate that only medically necessary treatments be performed on intersex children, and that support and education should prevail instead of shame and concealment.

## **ARE INTERSEX CONDITIONS HARMFUL?**

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

## **WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INTERSEX AND TRANSGENDER?**

Intersex persons are those who, due to birth or natural development, cannot be physically identified as solely male or female. In other words, there is an identifiable physical ambiguity. Transgender persons are usually born with visibly male or female bodies, but their gender does not match the body with which they were born, a condition often called gender dysphoria. For instance, someone with a male body might feel, inside, that their gender is female, and alter their outside appearance to match. Some transgender and intersex people theorize that gender dysphoria is a type of intersex condition, but this is a contentious notion, both in the trans and intersex communities.

Some intersex people however, do identify also as transgender, transsexual, or genderqueer, especially those whose gender was chosen for them at birth and their genitals made to match. They may, for instance, have been born inter-

sex, assigned as female at birth, but experienced their gender as male and later transitioned to such.

## **ARE INTERSEX PEOPLE QUEER?**

Some are, and some aren't. Many intersex persons, especially those who are also GLBT, identify and work within the queer movement. As a result of their efforts, more and more queer organizations include education and inclusive statements on intersex. Many such persons feel a connection between the stigma placed on intersex and that placed on other sexual and gender minorities, such as GLBT identities. Other intersex people, however, see their condition as a strictly medical affair and feel no affiliation with the queer community. Still others feel an affinity with the queer community, but prefer to identify as allies. Generally speaking, one should not assume that an intersex person identifies as queer or queer-affiliated unless they say so. That being said, queer organizations are encouraged to be inclusive of those intersex individuals who do identify and to educate themselves on intersex issues.

## **HOW CAN I BE AN INTERSEX ALLY?**

One of the best ways to be an intersex ally is to educate others, such as family and friends, about intersex issues. The more we spread the word, hopefully the less likely people will accept surgery as the only option when they or someone they know has an intersex baby. Pass out brochures. Arrange for a screening of an intersex documentary. Call out people who make jokes about hermaphrodites or spread misinformation. Invite an intersex activist to speak at your group or church meeting. Donate money to an intersex organization. And, of course, further educate yourself. The intersex community would love your support.