Who is intersexual?

Intersex (previously referred to as hermaphrodite) refers to a condition because of which an individual may have sex chromosomes, anatomy or physiology that are not socially considered standard for either male or female. Intersex conditions are often visible at birth, but some develop later during puberty. There is no single “intersex body”; intersex encompasses a wide variety of conditions that do not have anything in common other than that they are deemed “abnormal” by the medical establishment.

How often are people born intersex?

It is hard to say how many people are born intersex because there isn’t always a clear cut-off point for what body fits under the term intersex, and some people are not clearly intersex until puberty. There have been some estimates that suggest that 1 in 2000 children are born with clearly intersex conditions (this estimate does not take in account development during puberty.)

How are people with intersex conditions treated by physicians?

When confronted with an intersex child, doctors follow a protocol that essentially mandates cosmetic surgery in the first years of that child’s life to create genitals that appear “normal” (i.e. conform to society’s standards for male and female bodies). This encouraged cosmetic surgery risks compromising sexual sensitivity and future gender/sex preferences of the individual. Doctors have decided that infants must have a penis longer than two centimeters or a clitoris less than one centimeter. If an infant does not meet these requirements, they may have their bodies operated on, usually for purely cosmetic reasons. If operated on, people with intersex conditions often experience multiple surgeries which are followed by hormone treatments to secure their bodies to one sex, whether or not they later identify with that sex. Doctors base their reasons for early genital surgery on the assumption that people with intersex conditions would have mental anguish growing up with genitals that weren’t like everyone else’s. Doctors rely on this assumption even though there have not been adequate studies to support this; in fact many intersexuals experience mental anguish because of the drastic surgeries they experience, the shame and secrecy surrounding their intersex conditions, and their inability to talk openly about their conditions with trusted parents and doctors.

Are people with intersex conditions transgender?

Though some intersexed individuals identify as transgender, not all do. Transgender and intersex communities often work together due to some similarities in the form of oppression both groups face, but each group has unique needs as well. Please refer to the GenEq info sheet Transgender to compare and contrast the two.
What are some of the obstacles that intersex people face?

People with intersex conditions often grow up with a lot of shame and secrecy regarding their bodies and many of the medical procedures they went through. Finding out their medical history can be a challenge—talking to reluctant family members and tracking down medical records can be a time-consuming and difficult task. Since doctors often assign a sex to intersex individuals in infancy, some intersex individuals later realize that they do not identify with the sex and gender to which they were assigned and raised. Many people with intersex conditions have to deal with the aftermath of “normalizing” genital surgeries including loss of fertility, frequent urinary tract infections, and loss of sexual sensitivity.

How can I be respectful of intersex people?

Be aware of your language. Don’t use the term hermaphrodite—though it has been reclaimed by some intersex individuals, do not assume that it is appropriate for you to do so. Use “intersex” instead. Also, if it is not clear, ask which pronoun an individual would prefer you use (he/his, she/her, or some people prefer gender neutral pronouns such as ze/zir or hir). Be aware of the seriousness of the struggles intersex individuals go through by educating yourself further on intersexuality, particularly if you are the parent of an intersex child. The Intersex Society for North America (listed below) has videos and material on the intersex movement, including interviews with intersex adults, which should be a crucial educational source to utilize before making a decision about surgery on an intersexed infant. Help to educate others about intersexuality by inviting intersex speakers to talk to groups or classes that you are involved in.

Where can I find more information?

**The Intersex Society for North America (ISNA)**
An advocacy group that works to end unwanted surgeries and spread awareness about intersexuality.
www.isna.org

**Bodies Like Ours**
Bodies Like Ours is an informational website with clear explanations and personal stories about intersexuality.
www.bodieslikeours.org

**Gender Public Advocacy Coalition and (GenderPAC)**
A national organization working to end gender discrimination through lobbying and education.
www.gpac.org

**Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Programs and Services**
Gender Equity Resource Center
202 Cesar Chavez
http://geneq.berkeley.edu

**Intersex in the Age of Ethics**
Edited by Alice Dreger

**Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex**
By Alice Dreger

**Sexing the Body: Gender Politics the Construction of Sexuality**
By Anne Fausto-Sterling

**Lessons from the Intersexed**
By Suzanne Kessler

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