

Frequently Asked Questions about...

INTERSEX Activism

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For current version, visit <http://www.ipdx.org>

What is intersex? Technically, intersex is defined as “congenital anomaly of the reproductive and sexual system.” Intersex people are born with external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, and/or endocrine system that are different from most other people. There is no single “intersex body”; it encompasses a wide variety of conditions that do not have anything in common except that they are deemed “abnormal” by the society. Most intersex people identify as men or women, just like everybody else.

What do intersex activists want? We are working to replace the current model of intersex treatment based on concealment with a patient-centered alternative. We are not saying that intersex babies are better off left alone; we 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, we 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 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.

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 is no concrete boundaries to the definition of “intersex.” It is nonetheless estimated that about one in 2,000 children, or five children per day in the United States, are born visibly intersex and receive early intervention.

How do we know the correct gender of a child with an intersex condition? We won’t know the child’s gender until she or he is old enough to communicate to us. It is recommended that the child be assigned a gender based on our best prediction, and allow her or him to determine for herself or himself once she or he is old enough to do so. Irreversible surgeries on infants should be avoided in order to give them the widest range of choices when they are older. Performing surgeries will not eliminate the possibility that our prediction is wrong.

Can’t they just do a test to find out babies’ true sex? Medicine cannot determine the baby’s “true sex.” For example, chromosomes do not necessarily dictate one’s gender. Science can measure how large a clitoris is, but cannot conclude how large or small it needs to be. That is a social determination.

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). In humans, there are no “hermaphrodites” in this sense, although doctors have called people with intersex conditions “hermaphrodites.” We find the word “hermaphrodite” 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 the 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 help intersex movement? Join us! In addition to volunteering for or making donations to intersex activist groups such as Intersex Initiative, you can help by talking to your friends and family members about the intersex movement. The idea is that the more people are aware about us, the less likely they will accept surgery as the only option when they or someone they know have an intersex baby. Get your community, church or school group together and show documentary films about intersex (available from ISNA) or invite us to present.

For More Information:

Books:

“Intersex in the Age of Ethics” ed. 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
“As Nature Made Him” by John Colapinto

Films (available from Intersex Society of North America):

“First, Do No Harm: Total Patient Care”
“Mani’s Story”
“Redefining Sex”
“Hermaphrodites Speak!”
“Is it a Boy or a Girl?”

Web Sites:

Intersex Society of North America — www.isna.org
Intersex Initiative — www.ipdx.org
Bodies Like Ours — www.bodieslikeours.org