



Intersex Article 1: Overview

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Most people are born either male or female. An intersex person is someone who is born with a body which is in between the two. This can manifest in ambiguous genitalia, a non-standard reproductive system or non-standard chromosomes (for example, XXY rather than XY or XX). There are several conditions which can cause a person to be born intersex, but in simplistic terms it happens because of variations in the biological signals received by different cells in the body of the foetus during gestation. Because these variations in the signals vary in strength, some intersex cases are more extreme than others.

Every foetus starts out with a set of sex chromosomes - usually XX for females or XY for males - and some otherwise undifferentiated cells which will develop into its genitals and reproductive system. As it grows, the foetus develops a rudimentary reproductive system which has the potential to become feminised (ovaries and a womb) or masculinised (testicles). The sex chromosomes trigger signals which tell the reproductive system which way to develop. However, in some cases these are overridden by other hormonal signals, so the system which develops is at odds with what would commonly be expected. This can cause medical complications in some cases. It also causes anxiety for parents who don't know what to make of a child whose physical body is gender ambiguous.

Some intersex people undergo surgery during early childhood to make them more closely resemble ordinary boys or girls. Almost all intersex children are raised as either boys or girls. Often they are not told that they are intersex.

In some cases, it is not obvious at birth that a person has an intersex condition and it is not diagnosed until later life. Some intersex conditions become apparent at puberty, when secondary sex characteristics (breasts, body hair etc.) develop. Other people discover they are intersexed when they seek help because they have been unsuccessful in trying to have a baby. Most (but not all) intersex people are infertile.

One of the issues with assigning a gender to an intersex child is that it is not always possible to tell which they will emotionally identify as. In some cases, intersex people grow up to feel that the wrong choice has been made on their behalf. Most intersex people identify clearly as either men or women, but some identify as a third or in-between gender.

Most intersex people look either male or female. You would be unlikely to notice that a person was intersex when you passed them in the street. Most consider their conditions a private matter. Curious outsiders often ask intersex people to describe their genitals, but this is just as rude and intrusive as asking a non-intersex person to describe theirs.

It is estimated that somewhere between one in two hundred and one in two thousand people have an intersex condition. Despite this, awareness of intersex issues is very limited, even within the medical establishment. This is partly because intersex conditions have traditionally been kept secret due to being perceived as scandalous. Only over the past two decades have people with intersex conditions begun to join together as adults to campaign for better treatment.