



The Gender Centre Inc. Fact Sheet
Intersexuality 101
Courtesy the Intersex Society of North America

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What is Intersexuality (Hermaphroditism)?

Our culture conceives sex anatomy as a dichotomy: humans come in two sexes, conceived of as so different as to be nearly different species. However, developmental embryology, as well as the existence of intersexuals, proves this to be a cultural construction. Anatomic sex differentiation occurs on a male/female continuum, and there are several dimensions.

Genetic sex, or the organisation of the "sex chromosomes," is commonly thought to be isomorphic to some idea of "true sex." However, something like 1/500 of the population have a karyotype other than XX or XY. Since genetic testing was instituted for women in the Olympic Games, a number of women have been disqualified as "not women," after winning. However, none of the disqualified women is a man; all have atypical karyotypes, and one gave birth to a healthy child after having been disqualified.

The sex chromosomes determine the differentiation of the gonads into ovaries, testes, ovo-testes, or non-functioning streaks. The hormones produced by the foetal gonads determine the differentiation of the external genitalia into male, female, or intermediate (intersexual) morphology. Genitals develop from a common precursor, and therefore intermediate morphology is common, but the popular idea of "two sets" of genitals (male and female) is not possible. Intersexual genitals may look nearly female, with a large clitoris, or with some degree of posterior labial fusion. They may look nearly male, with a small penis, or with hypospadias. They may be truly "right in the middle," with a phallus that can be considered either a large clitoris or a small penis, with a structure that might be a split, empty scrotum, or outer labia, and with a small vagina that opens into the urethra rather than into the perineum.

What are the frequencies of Intersex conditions?

The frequency of inherited genetic conditions, such as congenital adrenal hyperplasia, differs for different populations. It has been estimated that as many as 4% (although it is more likely to be around 1%) of the population could be affected by some form of intersexuality. This includes men or women with abnormal hormonal levels.

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