

## Being an ally to intersex people

- Be clear in your language and frame of reference. Intersex is about sex characteristics. It is distinct from legal sex, sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Adopt the 2017 Darlington Statement by Australian and NZ intersex organisations and advocates.

### *Bodily autonomy and depathologisation*

- Many medical papers on people with intersex variations explicitly identify fears of stigma, gender identity issues and non-heterosexual behaviours as reasons for medical interventions.
- Ally with our call to prohibit harmful practices on infants, children and adolescents with intersex variations.
- Challenge body shaming and the elimination of intersex traits via IVF.
- Support intersex inclusion in human rights and health initiatives.

### *Anti-discrimination*

- Intersex people face discrimination in healthcare, education, employment, and other services, often due to physical characteristics, developmental issues, or assumptions about our identities.
- Include measures to combat stigma in healthcare, education, employment, diversity and inclusion, and anti-bullying policies.

### *Forms and surveys*

- Consider whether and where your organisation needs to collect data on sex, gender and title.
- Recognise the heterogeneity of intersex people. Recognise that intersex and non-intersex people alike benefit from F, M, X and multiple options.
- Find more information at [ihra.org.au/forms](https://ihra.org.au/forms)

### *Full participation*

- Put people with intersex variations and intersex-led organisations front and centre when talking about intersex.

## Resources

### *Framework documents*

- *Darlington Statement (Australia-Aotearoa/NZ)*  
[darlington.org.au/statement](https://darlington.org.au/statement)
- *Yogyakarta Principles plus 10*  
[yogyakartaprinciples.org/yp10](https://yogyakartaprinciples.org/yp10)

### *Non-fiction*

- *Fixing Sex: Intersex, Medical Authority and Lived Experience* by Katrina Karkazis
- *The Legal Status of Intersex Persons* by Jens Sherpe, Anatol Dutta and Tobias Helms (eds)
- *Critical Intersex* by Morgan Holmes (ed)
- *Raising Rosie: Our Story of Parenting an Intersex Child* by Stephani Lohman, Eric Lohman and Georgiann Davis

### *Fiction*

- *Golden Boy: A Novel* by Abigail Tarttelin
- *None of the Above* by I W Gregorio

### *Documentaries*

- *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* (2011)
- *Intersexion* (2012)
- *XXXY* (2000)

### *People, training, information and support*

- *Intersex Human Rights Australia*  
[ihra.org.au](https://ihra.org.au)
- *AIS Support Group*  
[aissga.org.au](https://aissga.org.au)

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Intersex Human Rights Australia

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IHRA 2018 (2018-04)

Acknowledgements and resources: [ihra.org.au/allies](https://ihra.org.au/allies)

# INTERSEX for ALLIES

**ihra**  
Intersex Human Rights Australia

## Who are intersex people?

Intersex people are born with sex characteristics that do not fit medical norms for female or male bodies. Intersex traits are natural manifestations of human bodily diversity. There are many different intersex traits. Not all intersex traits are visible in infancy. Intersex variations might become apparent prenatally, at birth, at puberty, or in adulthood. They may become apparent when trying to conceive.

## How common are intersex people?

A low-range statistic is around 1 in 2,000 people (.05% of births) but a more likely figure may be closer to 1.7%.

## Are intersex and hermaphrodite the same?

Biologically, no. Hermaphrodites (such as snails) possess fully functioning sets of both "male" and "female" sex organs. This is impossible in mammals.

Linguistically, the word originates in the Greek myth of Hermaphroditus who was both male and female, having elements of both sexes.

Some intersex diagnoses have been termed "pseudo-hermaphrodites" or "true hermaphrodites". While some intersex people use the term, others find it stigmatising due to that medical history. If in doubt, it is best only used by people with intersex variations.

## What issues do intersex people face?

We can experience stigma, shame, discrimination, trauma and human rights violations due to our natural sex characteristics. Key issues include unwanted medical interventions and genetic de-selection on grounds that intersex traits are disorders, body shaming, and discrimination in access to healthcare, education, other services and in employment.

## Do intersex people have health issues?

Intersex people, like all people, have health issues. In a few diagnoses, immediate medical attention is needed from birth; some health issues may be associated with specific intersex variations, but being intersex is not a health issue in and of itself. Natural intersex bodies are most often healthy.

## Why are intersex people subjected to medical interventions?

Medical interventions attempt to make the bodies of people with intersex variations conform to male or female norms. Current medical protocols are based on the ideas that medical interventions will "minimise family concern and distress" and "mitigate the risks of stigmatisation and gender-identity confusion".

Such surgical interventions intrinsically focus on appearance, and not sensation or sexual function. They are also problematic as children cannot give informed consent and parents are often unaware of the full, lifelong implications. Adolescents, and even adults, have also reported pressure by doctors or families to conform to societal norms. The UN and many other human rights institutions now recognise these as forms of violence and harmful practices.

Very many intersex people suffer the physical and emotional effects from such interventions, and related shame and secrecy. Some doctors still believe that disclosure of a person's intersex status would be too alarming.

At a fundamental level, homophobia, stigma and ancient superstitions underpin contemporary mistreatment of people with intersex variations.

## What are DSDs?

In 2006, a group of doctors replaced the umbrella term intersex with "disorders of sex development" or DSDs. The new label reinforces the idea that intersex traits are disorders that need to be fixed.

There are some intersex people who use the term today, especially when accessing healthcare, or when first taught to use DSD by parents or doctors. People also use a range of specific diagnostic terms.

People with intersex variations are free to use any label, but the term intersex has become even more accepted and widespread today.

We believe that stigmatising language leads to poor mental health, marginalisation, and exclusion from human rights and social institutions. The term intersex promotes human rights for people born with variations of sex characteristics.

## What gender identities do intersex people have?

Intersex describes lived experiences of the body and we have many different ways of understanding our bodies, our sexes and our genders.

We have a broad range of gender identities, just like non-intersex people. The identities of people with intersex variations may sometimes not match our appearance. Having a non-binary gender identity does not automatically make someone intersex.

## Are intersex people transgender or gender diverse?

Some of us are, but many of us are not. The gender identities of intersex people frequently match our assignments at birth, and sometimes they may be freely chosen. Some people who have chosen their gender may identify as transgender or gender diverse.

Many intersex people have an experience of involuntary medical treatment to impose stereotypical sex characteristics, or are at risk of this. This can make descriptions of intersex people as "cis" or "cisgender" problematic.

## Are intersex people gay, lesbian, or queer?

It depends on the individual, how they understand themselves, how they present, and who they form relationships with. Every intersex person is different. Some people with intersex variations are LGB, queer or asexual, and many are heterosexual.

We share some common goals with the LGBT movement as we all fall outside of expected sex and gender norms. Intersex is part of LGBTI because of a shared experience of stigma based on sex and gender norms, not because we share a sexual orientation, or gender identity issues.

## What do intersex advocates seek?

We seek the rights to self-determination and bodily autonomy, the right to a life without stigma and discrimination, and the right to a life free from shame and secrecy.