

# WHAT IS INTERSEX?

## RAINBOW DEFINITIONS

### *Spotlight on the 'I' in LGBTTQIA+*

#### **What is Intersex?**

Intersex is the 'I' in the LGBTTQIA+ acronym. Intersex is an umbrella term used to describe variations of sex characteristics. These variations are innate. There are many different ways these variations in genitalia, hormones, internal anatomy or chromosomes can show up; there are up to 40 different intersex variations. Another umbrella term used to describe intersex are 'variations in sex characteristics' (VSC), or in medical environments; 'differences in sex development' (DSD).

#### **How many people are Intersex?**

There are many different sources of data around the world, however, it's estimated 1.7 to 4% of people globally are intersex – meaning they don't fit within typical female or male norms. We like to say it's as common as red heads!

#### **Are Intersex People Part of the LGBTTQIA+ Community?**

Intersex people often have similar experiences to LGBTTQIA+ people and confront many of the same challenges. Therefore many intersex people may also identify as Rainbow. Homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and outdated gender norms underlie many of the issues intersex people face. It is important to note that despite this inclusion, many intersex people identify as cisgendered and heterosexual. It is important to remember that gender identity and sexuality are distinctly different and separate to sex characteristics.

#### **What legal rights do Intersex people have in New Zealand?**

Intersex rights and protections are afforded through the Human Rights Act and the Bill of Rights Act, but they are implied and remain untested as Intersex is not explicitly listed in the Human Rights Act unlike sexual orientation for example which is listed.

#### **What issues do Intersex people face?**

One of the biggest issues facing the intersex community is non-consensual surgeries performed on intersex children. These are non-lifesaving procedures intended to change genital appearance and reproductive anatomy to fit arbitrary norms, these surgeries may include:

- The reduction or repositioning of a clitoris (clitoroplasty, or clitoral reduction/ recession)
- The creation or alteration of a vagina (vaginoplasty)
- The repositioning of an already functional urethra (hypospadias surgery)
- The removal of the organs that would make sex hormones (gonadectomy)

Most intersex surgeries are performed on children under 2 years old, denying them the opportunity to make important choices about their own bodies. This can leave intersex people with serious lifelong emotional and physical consequences that affect fertility, sexual function, and emotional well-being.

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#### **So what does intersex look like?**

People who are intersex are our co-workers, friends, neighbours, classmates — in other words, you've likely interacted with someone who is intersex and had no idea. That's because they look like anyone else you meet. Yes, sometimes the genitalia of a baby who has intersex traits is noticeably different, but that's just one variation.

A baby's genitalia may also look completely male or completely female. In other words, they may have male anatomy on the outside but female anatomy on the inside, or vice versa. It could be that a child's status as intersex doesn't become obvious until puberty, when their body produces more of a hormone that doesn't match their assigned sex. Or perhaps certain expected puberty milestones — like a deepening voice or growing breasts — don't happen. Or maybe the ones that happen are characteristic of what you thought was the “opposite” sex.

In these cases, a person who had more biological male features as a child might look more feminine after puberty according to society's traditional binary system. Or a person who looked female as a child might start to look more stereotypically male as a teenager. And sometimes, a person might not learn they have intersex traits until even later, such as if they have difficulty having children and see specialists to learn why. (Note: Not all people with intersex traits have issues with fertility.) It's even possible to have intersex traits and never know. Regardless, a person doesn't “become” intersex. It's what they're born with, whether it's clear at birth or not until later.

#### **What can you do to support?**

- Share this resource in your organisation to raise awareness and education.
- Speak up and stand up for interphobia/intersexphobia, just as you would homo, bi, and transphobia.
- Listen to individuals telling their stories and keep an open mind to learning about all the diverse ways people are intersex and their varied experience.
- Use gender neutral language and intersex inclusive language
- Google videos of Intersex people sharing their experiences and learn more
- Celebrate and raise awareness through Intersex Day each year.
- Use the full LGBTTQIA+ acronym, always ensuring you include the 'I'.
- When considering fundraising, consider Intersex Aotearoa as an option rather than your usual default.
- Follow intersex advocacy groups Intersex Aotearoa. [www.ianz.org.nz](http://www.ianz.org.nz)
- If you are updating your Pride Flags, consider moving to the Intersex Pride Progress Flag.

