

Patient information from BMJ

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Gender dysphoria in adults: surgery

Some people feel deeply unhappy living as a person of the gender that they were born. When these feelings cause constant distress, it's called gender dysphoria.

Most people with gender dysphoria 'cross-dress' some of the time. Others wish to live and be accepted as the gender of their choice all the time. This can involve having hormone treatments and, sometimes, surgery.

Living as your chosen gender

Many people challenge the accepted rules of how the different sexes (genders) should behave and live at some time in their lives. This is called gender non-conformity.

Gender dysphoria is different. It means that someone feels so uncomfortable being the sex that they were born that it causes them constant distress and unhappiness. (For more background information on gender dysphoria, see our leaflet *Gender dysphoria: what is it?*)

Some people with gender dysphoria live as their chosen gender without any medical treatment. Living as their chosen gender might involve changing their name and asking their friends and colleagues to treat them as someone of their chosen sex.

They might also change their appearance by wearing the clothes of their chosen gender, or by changing their hair, or wearing make-up. But they don't wish to make any more permanent changes.

For some people this isn't enough. They choose to have treatment that will make a bigger difference to the way they look and feel. This could mean that they choose to have hormone treatments.

Taking supplements of the opposite sex hormone to that of your birth gender can make you look and feel more like your chosen gender. (For more information on hormone treatments, see our leaflet: *Gender dysphoria in adults: hormone treatments.*)

Some people with gender dysphoria choose to go further, and to make more permanent physical changes to help them live as their chosen gender.

This means having what's called gender reassignment surgery, also known as sex reassignment surgery.

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Many people think of this surgery as meaning genital surgery, and surgery to either remove or create breasts. But there are several other types of surgery that can change the appearance of the face and body.

Before you can have any gender reassignment surgery, several things have to happen.

Before surgery

Having gender reassignment surgery is a major decision, and the surgery is extremely difficult to reverse. So if you choose to have this treatment you will have psychological support from gender identity specialists.

Your treatment team will help you understand:

- what the surgery involves, and
- what you can expect from it.

Having gender reassignment surgery is a long process. It starts with a lot of discussions with your treatment team (although for you, of course, the process of reaching this discussion will actually have begun years before).

Even if you choose to have surgery, whether you can have it depends on your treatment team. Apart from anything else, they can be held legally responsible for what happens to you. So they need to be as sure as possible that surgery is the right choice.

With that in mind, you will need to have changed your gender role and lived as your chosen gender for at least one year before your team will agree that you should have surgery. And your team will need to agree that you are happier living as your chosen sex.

Changing your gender role means:

- living as your chosen gender from day to day
- changing your name and sex on legal documents
- asking your friends, family, and colleagues to treat you as your chosen sex.

Before having most types of gender reassignment surgery, you will first need to have hormone treatment, usually for one to two years. For this to happen, your treatment team will first have to agree that hormone treatment is right for you.

Your treatment team will then need to agree that surgery is right for you. This means that they agree that:

- the surgery is medically necessary for you to feel comfortable as someone of your chosen gender
- the surgery will benefit you: for example, it will improve your quality of life.

It might sound like your doctors are making it really hard for you to get the treatment you feel you need. But they want to be sure that you make the right decisions for the right reasons.

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Gender reassignment surgery, and some effects of hormone treatments, are extremely hard to reverse.

Surgery for people born male

There are several types of surgery that can help people with gender dysphoria who were born male.

Most people choose only to have surgery that affects their obvious outward appearance, such as breast surgery. But some people choose to have surgery to change their genitals from male to female.

Whatever surgery you choose to have, you can discuss it with your treatment team as much as you need to before deciding whether to go ahead. Your team will give you psychological support through the whole process.

Breast surgery

You might hear this surgery called breast 'augmentation'. This involves using implants to help create feminine-looking breasts.

Genital surgery

This involves forming new female genitals (vulva, clitoris, and labia) from some of the male genital tissue, and removing the rest of the male genitals, including the testicles.

Hair removal

Although this is not really surgery, it tends to come under that heading. Hair removal can be done with electrolysis or with laser treatment.

Electrolysis involves killing individual hairs with heat treatment using a tiny probe. Some people find it slightly painful.

Laser treatment works by using light from a laser to damage hair follicles and stop them growing. It only works with dark-coloured hair and light-coloured skin.

Thyroid cartilage ('Adam's apple') surgery

Some people have surgery to make the Adam's apple look smaller and less masculine.

Some people also have an operation in the same area, called cricothyroid approximation. This can change the sound of your voice so that it sounds more feminine.

Doctors usually only recommend this operation if other methods of changing the voice, such as speech therapy, haven't worked. If you have this operation you will usually need to have speech therapy afterwards.

Surgery on the face and skull

The medical name for this is craniofacial surgery. It involves surgery to change the shape of the face and skull. It is complicated and difficult, and doctors only recommend it after a

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long period of hormone treatment and when other cosmetic procedures haven't worked well enough.

Surgery for people born female

There are several types of surgery that can help people with gender dysphoria who were born female.

Whatever surgery you choose to have, you can discuss it with your treatment team as much as you need to before deciding whether to go ahead. Your team will give you psychological support through the whole process.

Breast surgery

Surgery to change the appearance of the breasts is perhaps the most obvious type of surgery for people with gender dysphoria who were born female.

Most doctors prefer that you have this surgery after a period of hormone treatment.

Hysterectomy (removal of the womb)

Some people choose to have an operation called a hysterectomy, to remove all or part of the womb (uterus), and an operation called an oophorectomy, to remove the ovaries.

This is partly because of concerns that hormone therapy can increase the chance of some cancers. You can talk with your treatment team about any concerns about the risk of cancer, and about whether this surgery is right for you.

Phalloplasty (surgery to create male genitals)

Phalloplasty is surgery to create a penis. It is complex and sometimes people need several operations. Most people choose not to have this operation. As with all types of surgery, you can discuss with your treatment team whether it is right for you.

Surgery on the face and skull

The medical name for this is craniofacial surgery. It involves surgery to change the shape of the face and skull. It is complicated and difficult, and doctors only recommend it after a long period of hormone treatment and when other cosmetic procedures haven't worked well enough.

What will happen?

If you have hormone treatment you will have check-ups every few months for the first year, and every six to 12 months after that, to make sure that the treatment is working as expected, and to check for other things that can be affected by hormone changes, such as your cholesterol levels, and your bone strength.

Hormone treatments can cause problems with the heart and blood vessels in some people. So it's important that you live as healthy a lifestyle as possible by, for example, keeping active and not smoking.

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If you have surgery your ongoing hormone treatment might be more complicated to manage. So you will need regular follow-up appointments to make sure your hormone levels are as they should be.

If you would like to talk to other people about their experiences of transgender issues, there is a lot of support online. For example, in the UK, transunite.co.uk is a directory of more than 100 local support groups.

Your treatment team might be able to put you in touch with a support group in your area, or you could search online.

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