

Patient information from BMJ

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Gender dysphoria in adults: what is it?

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.

What is gender dysphoria?

Gender non-conformity

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.

For these people, the way they see themselves, or how they live their lives, differs in some ways from how they are expected to be and to live for the gender they were born, within their culture.

So, for example, they might want to dress in a certain way, or have a job, that isn't thought suitable for their sex.

Gender dysphoria is different. It means that someone feels so uncomfortable being the gender that they were born that it causes them constant distress.

Gender dysphoria and occasional 'cross-dressing'

Many men with gender dysphoria 'cross-dress' some of the time. Doctors call this 'dual role transvestism'. But some people with gender dysphoria don't like the terms 'transvestism' and 'transvestite', as they see them as insulting.

This type of cross-dressing means wearing the clothes of the opposite sex for part of the time, in order to enjoy the feeling of being a member of that sex for a while.

There is no sexual side to this type of cross-dressing. For many men with gender dysphoria, this is as far as they feel the need to go to express this part of who they feel they are.

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More pronounced gender dysphoria

For some people with gender dysphoria, cross-dressing sometimes isn't enough. They want to live and be accepted in the gender of their choice all the time. These people usually feel unhappy having the body of someone of the sex they don't want to be.

For example, someone with gender dysphoria who was born female might be deeply unhappy about having breasts. And someone with gender dysphoria who was born male might feel deeply unhappy about having facial hair.

Some people with gender dysphoria decide that they are so distressed living as they are, that they want to have treatment to help them feel and look more like the gender they want to be.

What are the 'symptoms' of gender dysphoria?

It might sound strange to talk about symptoms of gender dysphoria, because it's not an illness. A better word, which doctors use when they assess whether someone has gender dysphoria, is criteria.

This just means the things that someone has to be thinking and feeling in order to have gender dysphoria. So, for a doctor to agree that you have gender dysphoria, you need to:

- have a strong desire to not look like someone of your birth gender, because you don't feel comfortable or happy being that gender. This means wanting to look either less masculine or feminine, possibly to the point of not wanting to have the genitals of your birth gender.
- have a strong desire to look like someone of your chosen gender. This means wanting to look either more masculine or feminine, possibly to the point of wanting to have the genitals of your chosen gender.
- have a strong desire to be someone of the opposite gender, or at least not of your birth gender.
- have a strong desire to be treated as someone of the opposite gender, or at least not of your birth gender.
- strongly believe that you have the typical feelings and reactions of someone of the opposite gender, or at least not of your birth gender. In other words, if you were born male, but you believe that you think and feel like a female. And, if you were born female, but you believe that you think and feel like a male.

Treatments for gender dysphoria

There are two main treatments that can help people with gender dysphoria:

Hormone treatments. Taking certain hormones can, over time, cause physical and psychological changes so that you look and feel more like the gender you feel that you are.

Surgery. Having one or more types of surgery can make you look and feel more like your chosen gender. There are several types of surgery, including surgery:

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- to create or remove breasts
- to change the appearance of the face
- to make the thyroid cartilage ('Adam's apple') smaller
- to change the genitals from male to female or from female to male.

Some of these treatments involve major changes that cannot be reversed. So making the right decisions is extremely important for you and for your doctor.

For more information on these treatments, see our leaflets: *Gender dysphoria in adults: hormone treatment*, and *Gender dysphoria in adults: surgery*.

For doctors to say that someone has gender dysphoria, and that their feelings are not just temporary, or that they are not caused by something else:

- you need to have had feelings of discomfort about your gender for at least 2 years
- your feelings must not be a symptom of a mental-health condition. This doesn't mean that if you have a mental-health issue you don't have gender dysphoria. It just means that the gender dysphoria must not be caused by the mental-health condition.

Intersex

Some people with gender dysphoria are born physically different from the gender that they are raised. This could mean that they were born with both male and female sex organs. Or it could be that their genes are not clearly male or female.

This is often called being 'intersex'. People born with both male and female sex organs used to be called 'hermaphrodite'. But this term is now considered by many people to be offensive.

But just because someone is intersex does not mean that they have gender dysphoria. Many intersex people are comfortable being the gender that they have lived as from birth.

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.

It's worth remembering that waiting times for treatment can be long, usually because of high demand. But there can be other barriers to treatment. For example, some doctors are less familiar than others with transgender issues and with how the treatment journey works.

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

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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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