



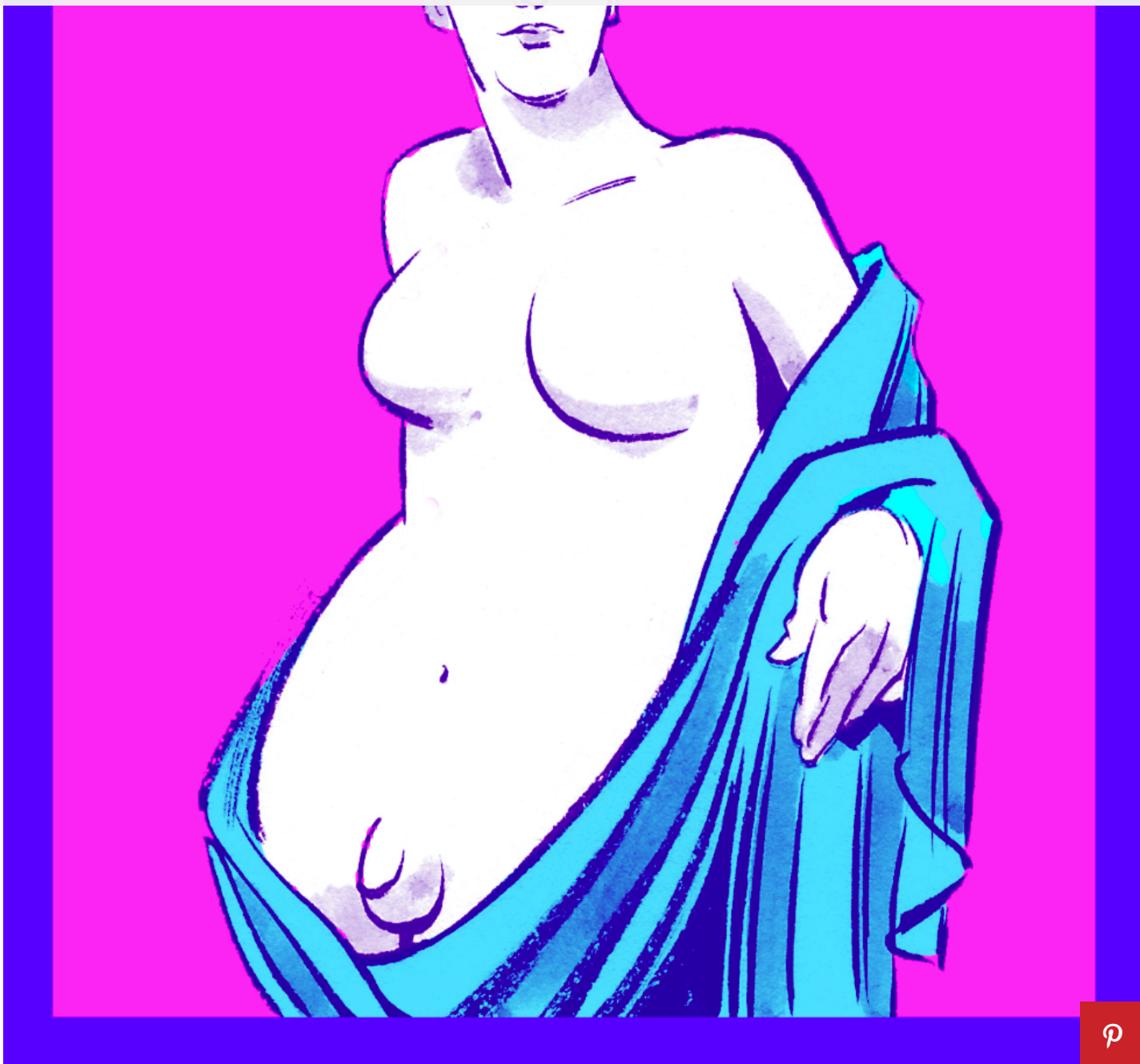
Intersex

By *Rose Surnow* Nov 17, 2016

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Intersex “is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male,” according to the [Intersex Society of North America \(ISNA\)](#). The old term for an intersex person was “hermaphrodite,” but that is now considered offensive. It’s a biological condition, rather than a condition where a person feels like they’ve been born into the wrong gender, like transgender people often report.



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VARIATIONS:

The odds of a child being born with atypical genitalia is 1 in 1,500 to 2,000, and **intersex** presents in dozens of different ways according to a **study** published by Brown University.

Sometimes a baby has ambiguous genitalia, for example, a penis that is much smaller than the norm and could be mistaken for a clitoris. Another way for intersex patients to present is



and one Y chromosome, but because their body is unable to respond to certain male sex hormones (called androgens), they may have mostly female sex characteristics or signs of both male and female sexual development.

Upon doctor's recommendations, some parents decide to do **surgical procedures at birth**. The thinking is that they are "fixing" the issue in infancy, thus sparing their children undue stress during puberty (which is already hella stressful). The ISNA doesn't advocate performing surgery on a child until that person can establish their own gender identity. They do, however, advocate assigning a child a gender at birth: "In cases of intersex, doctors and parents need to recognize that gender assignment of infants with intersex conditions as boy or girl, as with assignment of any infant, is preliminary. Any child — intersex or not — may decide later in life that she or he was given the wrong gender assignment; but children with certain intersex conditions have significantly higher rates of gender transition than the general population, with or without treatment."



RECOMMENDATIONS ON INTERSEX CARE:

If a patient has all the information about the risks and benefits of surgery, and they want to move forward with it, they absolutely should. However, elective, non-life threatening surgeries on children who don't have the ability to weigh in or give consent are more problematic. The ISNA encourages parents to hold off on surgery until the child can be involved in the process.

Georgiann Davis, intersex activist and medical sociologist at the University of Nevada, agrees with the ISNA on this point. She says, "Parents need to respect their child's bodily autonomy."



Both the ISNA and Davis encourage intersex people and their families to seek out peer support. Davis says, “Intersex is a natural sex variation. What doctors ought to do is connect parents of intersex children with other parents and intersex adults. Through peer support, parents will learn that it is always best to avoid making any medically unnecessary, and irreversible, decisions for their child.”

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The ISNA also encourages parents to help their intersex children get into therapy or counseling to help them navigate the psychological challenges.

If you are a parent of an intersex child, it seems the best way to move forward before making any decisions about your child’s sex is to educate yourself as much as possible, and connect with other people and **organizations** that advocate on behalf of intersex people.



RELATED TERMS:

Transgender



INTERSEX IN POPULAR CULTURE:

In 2007, **Oprah** recommended *Middlesex*, Jeffrey Eugenides's novel about an intersex character, in her famous book club and in the process catapulted awareness of intersex people into the mainstream.



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