

# Questionable Questions About Transgender Identity

## Introduction

Many people—particularly those who have never met a transgender person—are naturally curious about what it’s like to be transgender. There may be unfamiliar terms, conflicting information, and uncertainty around what is and isn’t OK to ask.

Asking transgender people questions about their experiences can be a great way to learn more about what it means to be transgender. Some transgender people are open to answering just about anything, while others may not want to share intimate details about their lives, especially outside of personal conversations with close friends.



This guide is intended to help you decide whether or not a particular question is appropriate to ask a transgender person in your life. It also has answers to specific questions you may have, along with thoughts on why transgender people may be uncomfortable if you ask them those questions directly.

Let’s dive in!

## “Should I Ask This Question?”

Because so many of us naturally learn by asking questions, we don’t always pause to consider whether or not a person wants to be asked a particular question. Asking personal and intimate questions of transgender people can make them feel like they’re being put on the spot, pressured to justify themselves, having their privacy invaded, or worse.

Here are a few things to think about before asking questions:

### Why do I want to know this information?

Curiosity is important, and a legitimate reason to have questions. However, if you’re only asking because you’re curious, it may be a good idea to turn to Google or other resources on this very website, such as our [Video Introduction to Transgender People](#), our [Transgender Basics](#), and our [Frequently Asked Questions about Transgender People](#) for information.

Before you ask a transgender person a question, pause and think whether you’re treating them differently—and asking more personal or inappropriate questions—simply because they’re transgender.

On the other hand, sometimes we need information to respectfully interact with people. Names and pronouns are a great example of this type of information—knowing someone’s name and the pronouns they use (for example, she/her/hers, he/him/his, or they/their/theirs) allows you to call them what they ask to be called, and treat them with respect.

### **Would I feel comfortable if someone asked these questions of me?**

Take a moment to put yourself in the shoes of the person being asked a question. For example, what surgeries they have or haven’t undergone or what their genitals look like can be very personal. How would you feel if someone asked to talk about your genitals, or share details about personal and intimate surgeries you’ve undergone? Even if you would be comfortable sharing that information, not everyone will feel the same way.

### **Would I ask this question of a non-transgender person in a similar situation?**

If you just met someone at a coffee shop, you probably wouldn’t ask questions about what their genitals look like, what surgeries they have or haven’t undergone, or about intimate details of their childhood. Before you ask a transgender person similar questions, pause and think whether you’re treating them differently—and asking more personal or inappropriate questions—simply because they’re transgender.

## **Specific Questions**

- Have you had “The Surgery?”
- What surgeries have you had?
- Are you planning to have surgery?
- What did your surgery cost?

### **Answering the Question:**

First of all, there isn’t one transition-related surgery that transgender people may have. In fact, there are many different surgeries that transgender people may undergo. These include surgeries that:

- Change facial features (such as brow lifts and rhinoplasties)
- Reconstruct the chest, sometimes known as “top surgery” (such as mastectomies and augmentation mammoplasties)
- Remove internal sex organs (like a uterus or ovaries)
- Reconstruct external genitalia (surgically constructing a penis or a vagina)
- Make one’s voice more typically feminine

Transgender people can have all, some or none of these surgeries. Some people don’t need certain surgeries, or any surgeries, some can’t afford them, and some can’t have them because of other medical conditions.

Like with any other medical treatment, different surgeries costs different amounts. The [Affordable Care Act makes it illegal for insurance companies to automatically deny coverage for transition-related care](#), including surgeries, and more and more private insurance companies are covering transition-related costs. But many people still haven’t been able to get their insurance companies to cover the cost, and may not be able to afford these procedures on their own.

It’s important to remember that no surgeries “turn” someone into a man or a woman, and transgender people’s genders are no less real or worthy of respect if they haven’t had particular surgeries or other medical treatments.



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#### **Why Pause Before Asking:**

Like anyone else, transgender people may naturally feel uncomfortable sharing personal details about their medical history, so it's important to consider whether you really need this information before asking about it. And, when you ask about surgery, you are basically asking a person to describe their genitals to you, something typically out of bounds. You also wouldn't ask just anyone to disclose their personal medical history. (Again, simply being curious is not the same as needing to know!) Different surgeries can be interesting, so if you want more information you can look at the descriptions and videos of the many surgeries out there.

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- What does hormone therapy do?
  - How long have you been on hormones?
  - Are you planning to go on hormones?
  - What hormones do you take?

#### **Answering the Question:**

Many transgender people take hormones to bring their bodies more in line with their gender identity. Some transgender people take hormones that make their bodies more typically masculine—usually testosterone. Some take hormones that make their bodies more typically feminine, usually a combination of hormones that block testosterone and increase estrogen. Hormones have a variety of effects, many of which are similar to the effects teenagers experience during puberty.

For example, the effects of taking masculinizing hormones (testosterone) can include:

- Thicker facial and body hair
- A deeper voice
- Increased muscles
- Changes in fat distribution to a more masculine body type

The effects of taking feminizing hormones (estrogen) can include:

- Slower and more sparse facial and body hair growth
- Softer skin
- Breast growth
- Decreased muscles and body strength

Some of these changes are reversible and change back if someone stops taking hormones, and some are not reversible.

There are some things that hormones don't change: for example, taking estrogen or testosterone won't make someone taller or shorter. But hormones do affect many characteristics that people typically rely on when deciding who looks like a man or a woman: for example, a transgender man on hormone therapy might grow a beard and chest hair, and may live his life being seen by everyone as a man regardless of whether he has had any surgeries.

The effects of hormones vary for each person, just like how non-transgender people experience different physical changes while going through puberty. For example, some non-transgender boys grow facial hair early on, and their facial hair might be thicker or thinner depending on their genetics. Much the same way, transgender men who take testosterone might grow thick or sparse facial hair and might grow it quickly or slowly, depending on their genetics and other physical characteristics.

Someone's internal sense of gender is a core part of that person's identity that often forms at an early age. This is true whether or not that person is transgender. Likewise, transgender people exist around the world, in every society and culture.

**Why Pause Before Asking:** Like with surgeries, the hormones a transgender person does (or doesn't) take can be personal and private.

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## ■ What are puberty blockers?

### **Answering the Question:**

Some transgender people who haven't yet completed puberty may be prescribed puberty blockers, which delay physical effects related to puberty. Unlike hormone therapy, the effects of puberty blockers are reversible: if someone starts puberty blockers, the effects of puberty will kick in if they stop taking them.

Puberty can have many lasting effects on the body. For example, during puberty, testosterone can



cause teenagers to develop broader shoulders, a deeper voice, and more typically masculine facial features (like a prominent brow line and facial hair). Estrogen can cause a person to develop breasts and round hips. For transgender teenagers, these changes can be difficult and even traumatic. Some of these changes—such as the broadening of shoulders caused by testosterone—are permanent, while others can only be changed through a series of often expensive surgeries.

For that reason, many doctors prescribe puberty blockers (also called inhibitors) for transgender young people to delay the effects of puberty. They are usually prescribed only after a long decision-making process that involves the transgender youth, the parents, and a therapist or a medical team.

Outside of transgender health, puberty blockers have been used for many years to treat young people with early onset puberty. They are known to be safe and effective.

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## ■ Are children too young to know their gender?

### **Answering the Question:**

For people who aren't transgender, the idea of children being transgender can be difficult to understand. How can someone that young, sometimes as young as two or three, really know?

While no one is sure what causes someone to be transgender, there is [widespread medical consensus](#) that our internal sense of gender is a core part of everyone's identity that can and does form at a young age for most people. Allowing a transgender child to express their true gender is not something taken lightly by parents, and is often done in conversation with doctors or therapists.

To put it more simply? No, children are not too young to know their true gender. Many children—whether they're transgender or not—instinctively know their gender identity.

### **Why Pause Before Asking:**

Asking a parent about how they raise their child can feel invasive or confrontational for the parent. Similarly, asking someone else's child about their identity or deeply held sense of self can be confusing or uncomfortable for the child.

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## ■ Are transgender people confused or going through a phase?

### **Answering the Question:**

Someone's internal sense of gender is a core part of that person's identity that often forms at an early age. This is true whether or not that person is transgender. Likewise, transgender people exist around the world, in every society and culture. From this we know that being transgender is not simply confusion or a phase, but a deeply held part of a person's identity.

### **Why Pause Before Asking:**

The experience and emotions of transitioning are personal and often private. In addition, this type of question can unintentionally sound like the person asking it is skeptical of the transgender person's true identity, or questioning who they are.

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## ■ What was your birth name?

## ■ Can I see photos of you from before you transitioned?

### **Why Pause Before Asking:**

Many transgender people are uncomfortable sharing personal details of their life from before they transitioned, including the name they were given at birth and photos or videos of what they looked like. This hesitation may come from memories of past harassment, hurtful comments, or physical violence. It may also come from feeling like they want to move away from those memories, and move forward as their true selves.

Some transgender people also feel that 'before' photos can detract from who they are today, and that seeing them may cause others to see them as less of their true gender. Similarly, some transgender people feel that these types of questions may suggest that they are somehow less than non-transgender people, or that the person asking the question is trying to dismiss or deny their true gender.

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## ■ What bathrooms to trans people use?

## ■ What bathroom do you use?

### **Answering the Question:**

Transgender people generally use the bathroom that matches the gender they live as. Transgender men--people who were thought to be female at birth, but know themselves to be male--generally use the men's room. Transgender women--people who were thought to be male at birth, but know themselves to be female--generally use the women's room. There's a good chance you've already used the same restroom as a transgender person without even realizing it.

Transgender people use the bathroom for the same reason as anyone else: to do their business and move on with their day.

Some trans people prefer to use single-user restrooms or gender-neutral restrooms when available,

as bathrooms can feel unsafe or uncomfortable for many transgender people. Likewise, sometimes transgender people need to make a case-by-case decision about their bathroom use based on safety or privacy.

For people who do not identify as male or female (who are sometimes referred to as “non-binary people”) using either the women’s and the men’s room might feel unsafe, because others may verbally harass them or even physically attack them. Non-binary people should be permitted to use the restroom that they believe they will be safest in. For more information on non-binary people, please visit this [page on non-binary identity](#).

### **Why Pause Before Asking:**

Transgender people use the bathroom for the same reason as anyone else: to do their business and move on with their day. Questioning transgender people about bathrooms can make them feel uncomfortable or like they have to justify their identity and true self.

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■ Do transgender people regret transitioning or change their minds?

■ Do you regret transitioning?

### **Answering the Question:**

People do not transition on a whim, and almost all transgender people have thought deeply about their gender for a long time before transitioning. As such, it is extremely rare for transgender people to change their minds or regret transition. Those who do so are almost exclusively upset not at their transition, but about rejection by family, friends, and sometimes the inability to get a job, as discrimination against transgender people is still very widespread.

### **Why Pause Before Asking:**

The experience and emotions of transitioning are personal and often private. In addition, this type of question can unintentionally sound like the person asking it is skeptical of the transgender person’s true identity.





## ■ How can you tell if someone is transgender?

### ■ Are you transgender?

#### **Answering the Question:**

The only way to tell for sure if someone is transgender is by having a conversation with them and them telling you. You usually cannot tell if someone is transgender from their appearance, their voice, or anything about their body. Many non-transgender people have physical features that might not conform to stereotypes about how men and women look: for example, some non-transgender women are taller and have broad shoulders, and some non-transgender men have a slight build and higher pitched voices. And many transgender people have an appearance that conforms to common stereotypes about how men and women look, and few people would guess that they're transgender unless they say so. According to transgender people who responded to the 2011 National Transgender Discrimination Survey, about 21% say that no one ever knows they are transgender, and about 22% say that most or all of the time other people can tell (with the rest saying sometimes or occasionally).

#### **Why Pause Before Asking:**

Speculating about what someone's body parts looks like or examining ways they conform or don't conform to sex stereotypes can feel uncomfortable or intrusive to many people. For some people, asking if someone is transgender sounds like a comment about their appearance or bodily characteristics, which they may consider offensive regardless of whether they are transgender.

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## ■ What's the difference between a transgender woman and a drag queen?

#### **Answering the Question:**

A transgender woman is someone who was born a boy, but deeply understands herself to be a woman. Transgender women may dress in ways that appear more feminine, but, like many non-transgender women, may not. Some transgender women love dresses and makeup, while others don't. Being transgender is not performance or acting as a character, it is a deeply held part of someone's identity.

“Drag” is a style of performance that exaggerates feminine or masculine characteristics as part of a performance or simply for fun. Someone's appearance will ‘in drag’ is a costume used to perform a character, rather than an expression of their true gender. Historically, drag has often been performed by men, often but not always gay men, who are not transgender. These men may call themselves drag queens.

Because of the challenges that transgender people—particularly transgender women—face when seeking employment, it is not uncommon to see transgender women performing in drag. Some transgender women who perform in drag have begun referring to themselves as showgirls, in part to distinguish themselves from non-transgender men who may also perform in drag. Calling a transgender woman a drag queen may be hurtful or insulting because it implies she is not actually a woman, and is simply playing a part or pretending to be a woman.

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■ Why do there seem to be more transgender people now?

■ Is being transgender a new thing?

**Answering the Question:**

The experience of those whose deeply held sense of their gender does not match their body at birth has been documented for thousands of years across many cultures.

As transgender people in the United States gain visibility and acceptance, and as more transgender people are able to connect with each other and build strong communities—both online off—more and more transgender people feel safe being open about who they are. Until recently, many transgender people lived in shame and secrecy, didn't have the words to express how they felt, or didn't think that living according to their authentic gender was a real option. But that doesn't mean that there were fewer transgender people out there. Being transgender is not new, is not a fad, and is not going away.

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■ With whom do transgender people have sex?

■ How do you have sex?

**Answering the Question:**

There is no one way transgender people have sex, just as there is no one way people who aren't transgender have sex. Just like with anyone else, no two transgender people will enjoy exactly the same thing, use their bodies in exactly the same way during sex, or have the exact same sexual desires. Likewise, some transgender people are comfortable having sex prior to transitioning, while some are not.

Transgender people are gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, straight, and every other sexual orientation.

Some people find language such as 'straight' or 'gay' to be confusing when discussing transgender people. It's helpful to remember that transgender men are men, and transgender women are women. So a gay transgender man is a man who is primarily attracted to other men, and was thought to be female when he was born. A straight transgender woman is a woman who is primarily attracted to men, and was thought to be male when she was born.

**Why Pause Before Asking:**

Take a moment to review the 'should I ask this question?' section of this guide. Are you personally hoping to have sex with this transgender person? And, does it seem like they are interested in you? If not, who they have sex with, or how they have sex, is probably none of your business.

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■ Are trans men just really masculine lesbians/trans women really feminine gay guys?

■ Are you sure you're not just gay?

**Answering the Question:**

Transgender men are men, not masculine women. They might be straight and attracted to women, but they might not be. And transgender women are women, not feminine men, and they might or might not

be attracted to men. It's important to remember that transgender people can be gay (like transgender women who are attracted to other women, and transgender men who are attracted to other men), straight, or have any other sexual orientation.

### **Why Pause Before Asking:**

Many transgender people are upset with this question because it implies that their “real” gender is the gender they were thought to be when they were born. It also makes assumptions about who they're attracted to.

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## **■ My Question Wasn't Answered!**

If you have a question about transgender people or transgender identity that wasn't answered on this page, first check out our pages [Frequently Asked Questions about Transgender People](#), [Understanding Transgender People: The Basics](#), and [Supporting the Transgender People in Your Life: A Guide to Being a Good Ally](#).

If you are still stumped, email NCTE's Community Storytelling Advocate, Rebecca Kling, at [rkling@transequality.org](mailto:rkling@transequality.org) and we may choose to include your question in a future update of this page.

