

# Understanding sex, sexuality and gender

## Understanding the term LGBTIQA+

LGBTIQA+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and asexual. The plus is used to show that it is also inclusive of the full diversity of genders, sexualities and bodies, including people who identify as pansexual, gender diverse, agender, gender fluid, non-binary, as well as people who are questioning their gender and/or sexuality.

While one term cannot capture the diversity of identities, sexualities, relationships, bodies and experiences, it can be helpful to bring these diverse groups together under one label when highlighting their shared experiences of stigma, discrimination and marginalisation, and promoting safe, inclusive services.

Whenever possible, it is always best to be as specific as possible and to use a person's preferred terminology.

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## Sex

Sex generally refers to the chromosomal, gonadal and anatomical characteristics associated with biological sex. This is not always as clear-cut as 'male' or 'female'.

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## Intersex

Intersex is the broad category for people who do not fit within the male/female sex binary. Intersex Human Rights Australia (IHRA) defines intersex people as:

*Intersex people have innate sex characteristics that do not fit medical and social norms for female or male bodies, and that create risks or experiences of stigma, discrimination and harm. Sex characteristics are physical features relating to sex, including chromosomes, genitals, gonads, hormones, and other reproductive anatomy, and secondary features that emerge from puberty.*

It is important to understand that having an intersex variation does not result in a single 'type' of person. People with intersex traits can have a wide variety of physical or biological types and these may not always align with social and/or legal understandings of sex or gender.

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## Gender

Gender is the sociocultural division of people traditionally based on an assumed difference between the sexes. As a system, gender conveys social meaning that is typically encoded as femininity and masculinity.

Gender presentation is how a person expresses their gender using signs and signals. This can be clothing, physical appearance, and even behaviour and mannerisms. Many of the ways we present ourselves to the world carry a gendered meaning.

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## Gender diverse

Gender diverse is an umbrella term that describes people whose gender is different to the legal sex that was assigned to them at birth.

## Trans/transgender

A gender diverse person may identify as transgender (often shortened to trans). A trans person is a person whose gender identity does not match the expectations placed on the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, a person assigned female at birth may feel a gender identity that more closely aligns to the expectations of masculinity and may identify as a man. Because gender is about sociocultural differences and self-understanding, it is important to recognise that the way someone understands their gender is just as valid as being assigned a gender at birth.

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## Non-binary

Many people feel that the rigid division between masculinity and femininity does not fit their gender identity and they may choose to adopt a non-binary identity.

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## Gender affirmation

A trans or gender diverse person may choose to take steps to socially, legally and/or medically affirm their gender. This may include changing their name and/or pronouns, changing their gender presentation, or physically changing their body to align with their gender, such as through taking hormone replacement therapy. Gender affirmation is a personal journey and will look different to everyone. It is important to recognise that a person's gender is valid regardless of whether they choose to affirm their gender socially/legally and/or medically.

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## Sexuality

Sexuality is comprised of three separate but interconnected dimensions:

- > attraction,
- > behaviour and
- > identity.

For example, a woman who has sex with men (behaviour) to whom she is sexually attracted (attraction) and who identifies as straight (identity) would be a heterosexual woman.

### Common identifiers for sexuality are:

- > heterosexual/straight: an individual who is attracted to people of a different gender to their own
- > homosexual/gay/lesbian: an individual who is attracted to people of the same gender as their own
- > bisexual/pansexual: an individual who is attracted to people of both the same and different genders
- > asexual: an individual who does not experience sexual attraction.

Typically, there is a view that attraction, behaviour, and identity have a clear alignment, as seen in the examples above. However, sexuality is often linked to the heteronormative model based on a gender binary, which does not allow for complexity of identities.

A man may occasionally have sex with men (homosexual behaviour) because he is visually attracted to the male physique (aesthetic attraction), but he may identify as straight (heterosexual identity) because his primary romantic and sexual relationships are with women.

The complexity of human sexuality is vast when considering sexual behaviour, attraction, relationship building, identity, and societal norms.