

I have male and female genitalia — Tell my boyfriend? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Okay, I think this is really embarrassing, but I have a vagina and testicles. I'm too ashamed to go and talk to anyone about it. My mom always asks me if I'm okay with it, but last time she did, I just ran away. I'm so upset, and I haven't told any of my friends because I know they would make fun of me. I just don't know what to do; I have a long term boyfriend and he always wonders why I won't show him my body. I was thinking about having sexual intercourse with him, but I know he would not want to have anything to do with me after he finds out. I'm not sure if I'm a man or a woman.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Despite society's attempts to neatly label people as "male" or "female," there are many folks like you who defy these socially constructed categories. People with sexual or reproductive characteristics that can't easily be categorized as male or female are referred to as having an intersex ^[2] condition. Those with an intersex condition may be born with reproductive organs in many shapes, sizes, and combinations, or may have genitalia that outwardly appear to be associated with one sex, while having chromosomes that fit a different sex. While you say you feel embarrassed, it's good to know that many people have intersex conditions or disorders of sex development, and there are people available to provide you with information and support.

Unfortunately, many people lack understanding about intersex issues, so it's not surprising that you're wary to open up to your friends and your boyfriend. First of all, it's entirely up to you if, and when, you disclose what you're packing below the belt. Some folks believe that having an intersex condition is a private matter. Other people feel that talking openly and honestly about their bodies is the best way to be themselves, and possibly to reduce the shame and stigma that may come with being a person that isn't easily labeled male or female. A third option is to take a "wait and see" approach by slowly earning a friend's trust and disclosing when you feel ready. For now, you may choose who and when to tell, be it one close friend, just your boyfriend, or no one at all.

If you decide to talk to others, you will indeed be taking a risk, and there may be some awkward

moments. As you mentioned, it's possible that a friend will make some insensitive comments — perhaps to hide her/his own discomfort or confusion. Given that you have a friendship, it's also possible that these negative comments will subside as they realize you're still, in essence, the same person they have always enjoyed being around. It takes a lot of courage to put yourself out there; if you decide disclosing is the choice you want to make, you may want to consider how you can cope with potentially negative reactions from friends.

In regards to your boyfriend, deciding to have sex with a partner for the first time is a big step no matter what your sex or gender. You may want to take a look at [Trying to decide when to have first intercourse](#) ^[3] in the *Go Ask Alice!* archive as you continue to decide what's right for you on that front. You say that your boyfriend will not want to have anything to do with you if he finds out your body is different from what he expects. You may be right, but it's also possible that his reaction will surprise you. Perhaps he's more attracted to your funny personality, your zany trivia knowledge, or your sexy kisses and couldn't care less if you have some "extra" parts. Being vulnerable is a challenging aspect of intimacy, but it can also bring you and your partner closer together.

Along those lines, there may be other positives to disclosing the fact that you're a person with an intersex condition. By talking more openly about your body with those who are close to you, such as friends and family, you may come to feel less embarrassed and more comfortable in your own skin. Disclosure may also be a turning point that deepens your relationship with a friend or your boyfriend. For example, those you confide in may feel closer to you because you put trust in her or him. Disclosure may also open the door for your friend or boyfriend to confide in you about her/his own worries.

Before you have these conversations, it could be helpful for you to talk with a mental health professional that's familiar with intersex issues. S/he can help you explore the pros and cons of disclosing, as well as your underlying feelings about body image, sex, and gender. They may also be able to help you find opportunities to connect with the other people in the intersex community who share your experience. It can prove challenging to share this information with your friends or your boyfriend, but their reactions may surprise you in a good way. Just as your mom wants you to be comfortable with yourself, your friends or boyfriend may feel the same way because they all care about you.

Best of luck!

Alice!

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