

Genital Variation

People's genitals are as unique as snowflakes! No two are alike...

Our bodies, including our genitals, come in a variety of shapes, colors, and sizes. No two are exactly alike.

Same bits & pieces, composed differently

Did you know all human fetuses start out “female” unless hormones direct them differently? That’s why a fully-formed penis shares many characteristics with a clitoris, including a darker “underskin” and a thin “ridge” or seam” which runs from scrotum to anus. Basically, everyone’s sexual anatomy is arranged to accomplish the same few tasks: to produce steroid hormones for growth and development, to support reproduction, and to create pleasure during sex. Variations in anatomy simply reflect our unique abilities to accomplish these same tasks.

Media paints an inaccurate picture

The images of genitals shown in ads and in porn are commonly altered—subjected to airbrushing, makeup, fancy camera angles, photo editing and size-distorting techniques. The end result is a socially-constructed aesthetic, one which creates a false perception of conformity and reinforces a sex/gender binary. Real bodies are more interesting, varied, and nuanced.

Vulvas, vaginas, & labia

A wide range of variables exist in the look of a vulva (the external genitalia). These include the length and width of a clitoris or vagina, as well as the color, length, and rigidity of labia. Typically, there are two sets of labia, the labia majora (outer labia) and labia minora (inner labia). About half of people’s labia

minora are longer than their labia majora and most labia are asymmetrical. Sometimes a person's vulva is the same color as the rest of their skin, sometimes they are lighter or darker. Appearance changes during puberty and across the life span.

Penises & scrotums too

Similarly, penises vary by in length, girth, color, and the amount of expansion during erection. The average penis is 2.5–5 inches long when flaccid and 5–7 inches when erect. Another common difference is the presence, or lack thereof, of foreskin. About half of all penises in the U.S. are circumcised; half are not. Functionality should not be affected one way or another. Scrotums (the “sacks” that hold testicles) also vary in length, size, color, and degree of hair or wrinkle. Spots, bumps, and moles on the penis are common, and generally no cause for concern.

Being intersex is as common as red hair

Sexual anatomy exists along a spectrum, with biologically female anatomy on one side, and biologically male anatomy on the other. Intersex individuals fall somewhere along this spectrum, exhibiting traits such as having a clitoris but no vaginal opening, having a divided scrotum, or a penis that resembles a large clitoris. Individuals who wonder about or have questions about being intersex can explore them with their Primary Care Provider (PCP). However, unless you are experiencing physical discomfort, your genitals are likely a normal and healthy representation of the continuum.

It's a question of style

Genital “styling” includes pubic hair removal, tattoos, and piercings. These creative expressions often reflect cultural trends, but can also create medical problems such as infections, ingrown hairs, and cysts. If you choose to remove pubic hair, use a clean razor or fresh wax each time. Genital body art can cause nerve damage or lead to infection if not done properly (e.g., a reputable technician with clean, sterile equipment). If you experience physical discomfort, or notice a worrisome change, schedule a medical appointment at Cornell Health online at myCornellHealth or by calling 607-255-5155.

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