

Transitioning 101

What is transitioning? The process a transgender person takes -- social, medical, and/or legal changes -- to affirm their gender identity. *While transgender people may take transitioning steps, when and how they take those steps differs for each person. Everyone's transition experience is different.*

Transitioning isn't just surgery and isn't the same for everyone. There are a series of steps:

- **discovery and research** -- begins when someone starts to recognize they don't feel like their sex assigned at birth;
- **social transitioning** -- the way someone presents their identity (e.g. name, pronouns, mannerisms, dress);
- **medical transitioning** -- any medical treatments or surgeries undertaken to affirm their gender identity (e.g. hormones, bottom/top surgery); and
- **legal transitioning** -- governmental processes to have one's identity officially recognized (e.g. legal name change, change of gender marker on birth certificate or identity documents).

DISCOVERY AND RESEARCH begins when someone comes to feel different than their sex assigned at birth. Can begin at any age, may take a while and can cause anxiety/depression as the impact on their life unfolds.

COMING OUT can be a part of transitioning, but not always. Can be the first step taken, especially if the person is a minor and must come out to parents/guardians to undertake legal and medical transitioning. Some transgender people wait until they move and then simply live as their gender. For example, a transgender person could choose not to come out growing up, then live as their gender identity when they arrive at college, transitioning without doing so publicly. Many transgender people come out as trans only to close friends or family, but not to the general public, casual acquaintances, or coworkers. Others are open.

SOCIAL TRANSITIONING begins when the person chooses to present to the world as who they really are. Changes may include names, pronouns (he, she, they, etc.), dress, gender markers on identification papers.

Can occur first because a person does not want, cannot afford, or cannot access forms of medical or legal transitioning. Other forms of social transition involve one's gender expression. A transmasculine person might get a short haircut and wear a binder (to contain breasts) or a packer (an artificial penis) to reflect their identity. A transfeminine person might grow their hair, wear feminine clothes, or tuck their genitals.

NOTE: people can change their names and pronouns in one area of their lives but not others. For example, a student might be going by their new name at school but have not told their family yet. Sometimes this segmentation is done for safety reasons, to avoid discrimination and harassment, or because they are not ready to come out to everyone. **It is important not to "out" anyone in those areas of their life.**

MEDICAL TRANSITIONING is a choice that some, but not all, take. Some are not interested, while some cannot afford to, do not have access to such services, or choose not to because they are not out as transgender and medically transitioning would out them.



In general, there are two categories of medical transitioning: **hormone replacement therapy** and **gender-affirming surgeries/procedures**. Some transgender people receive hormone replacement therapy and do not have any surgeries or other procedures. Others have certain surgeries but not all. For example, some trans men get top surgery but not bottom surgery.

Never assume what forms of medical transitioning a transgender person has done or wants to do.

Hormone replacement therapy uses hormones such as estrogen and testosterone to produce body changes similar to a second puberty. Probably the most common medical transitioning choice, it helps develop secondary sex characteristics associated with a gender identity. Testosterone would generate facial hair, redistribute body fat and stop menstruation for trans men. Estrogen would cause a trans woman to redistribute body fat (into a more “female” pattern) and develop breasts. Some HRT changes are permanent, while others reverse if the person stops taking HRT. Hormones must be continued to maintain their effects.

Gender-affirming surgeries/procedures

Bottom surgery is any gender-affirming surgery that relates to genital or reproductive organs, such as vaginoplasty, phalloplasty, hysterectomy or metoidioplasty.

Top surgery is any gender-affirming surgery that reshapes the chest in some fashion, such as mastectomy for transmasculine people or breast augmentation for transfeminine people.

Other procedures that do not fall into the two above categories might include electrolysis or laser hair removal to eliminate facial hair for trans women (which HRT does not do). There are many other treatments and surgeries related to transitioning.

Puberty blockers are not a form of transitioning per se, but are hormones that halt the onset of puberty for transgender and gender non-conforming youth. Puberty can be traumatic for transgender youth, as developing secondary sex characteristics associated with their sex assigned at birth can increase their gender dysphoria and also increase misgendering by others. Puberty blockers “pause” the onset of puberty until a child is old enough for other medical treatments such as hormone replacement therapy.

LEGAL TRANSITIONING involves having gender markers changed on identity documents, such as a driver’s license or passport, or a birth certificate. Perhaps more common is having a name legally changed from the birth name to the chosen name. Legal transitioning requirements depend on the state where the person lives.

Maine’s policy is relatively low-barrier. Gender on a driver’s license can be changed with a notice from certain practitioners. As of June, 2018, one can get a non-binary gender marker on Maine driver’s licenses. However, changing one’s gender marker on a Maine birth certificate requires a notarized letter from a physician that one has undergone gender-affirming surgery/treatment. Other states have even more barriers to changing name and gender markers on identity documents. See *transequality.org/documents* for specific policies.

Websites and National Organization Resources

Trans Student Educational Resources, transstudent.org
Gender Spectrum, genderspectrum.org
National Center for Transgender Equality, transequality.org
Trans Lifeline, 877-565-8860, translifeline.org
Transgender Law Center, transgenderlawcenter.org

Maine Resources

Maine TransNet, mainetransnet.org
Trans Youth Equality Foundation, transyouthequality.org
Gender Clinic,
mainehealth.org/maine-medical-partners/practices/pediatric-specialty-care/endocrinology-diabetes/the-gender-clinic