



# Navigating Gender Affirmation in the ACT

Practical information to support the medical, social and legal aspects of your transition.



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Medical transition involves different things for different people. Ultimately it is a process of physically changing your body - through hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or surgery - to align with your gender. Keep in mind that not all trans or gender diverse people will undergo a medical transition. Someone might simply not feel the need, or desire, to undertake medical interventions, or these actions might not be possible for a range of reasons, such as health conditions or financial constraints. One person's transition will look very different to another's - and that's okay! Nobody should feel compelled to medically transition - it's a totally personal decision. If these things don't feel relevant to your transition, and you want to read about other pathways, you might find the information on the social transition and legal transition more useful. The information presented here takes you through some key considerations for both feminising transitions (making your body more typically feminine) and masculinising transitions (making your body more typically masculine), and provides information for medical options available in the ACT. It also explains puberty blockers, which may be an option to consider for young people who have not yet reached puberty, or are in the early stages of puberty. Some trans and gender diverse people identify in a binary way, meaning they identify as either men or women. Some trans and gender diverse people identify in a non-binary way. Regardless of how you identify you have the right to medically transition in whatever way feels best for you. Some people might choose to just use HRT, some might choose to use HRT and have surgery and others might just have surgery. There isn't a right or wrong way to medically transition.

## The Gender Dysphoria Question

Whether it be your GP, a psychologist or another specialist, at some point in your medical transition you might be labelled or diagnosed as having gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is a medical term used to describe the distress that many trans or gender diverse people feel due to the fact that their body does not reflect their gender identity. You may feel this severely or mildly, occasionally or not at all. Whether or not you identify with this term is a personal matter. Your trans or gender diverse status is not more or less valid. We understand that this sort of terminology could feel pathologising, meaning it suggests that trans or gender diverse experiences are abnormal, or that they need to be 'cured'. It is a controversial term, and the use of it is deeply debated within the trans and gender diverse community. Nevertheless, moving forward with your transition in the current medical system might require you to be diagnosed with gender dysphoria. While this could feel unnecessary, in the current medical system, the diagnosis has advantages. Some doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists and other specialists will not deem medical transition options necessary or relevant without a diagnosis of gender dysphoria. Unfortunately, because of this medical gatekeeping, being 'diagnosed' with gender dysphoria might mean the difference between being able to access your desired medical transition options, or not.

## Informed Consent

An Informed Consent approach to trans and gender diverse healthcare promotes a cooperative relationship between individuals and service providers, and aims to put decision-making in the hands of trans and gender individuals themselves. Informed Consent emphasises education in order to enhance the individual's capacity to make informed decisions about their body. By doing so this type of practice seeks to reduce many of the unnecessary barriers facing trans and gender diverse people in accessing medical transition options. You can also download Equinox's guidelines for informed consent on the resources page of our website.

However AGA knows that not all doctors use informed consent in the way described above. Many doctors might also use the Standards of Care that were developed by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), which are promoted locally by the Australia and New Zealand Professional Association for Transgender Health (ANZPATH). These Standards of Care work through a diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria, as described above, and provide a framework for doctors and health professionals to use when making decisions about a possible medical transition with their trans and gender diverse clients. Many doctors who use this model may require you to see a mental health professional, like a psychologist or psychiatrist as part of your medical transition before you are able to begin HRT or have surgery. They might also ask you take undertake tests such as a karyotype test or bone density scans if you choose to take hormones. You have the right to ask your doctor why they consider it important to do any of these things, and to refuse if you do not feel satisfied that they are necessary or even if you just don't feel comfortable. Sometimes finding a doctor you feel comfortable with can take some time. If you feel pressured by your doctor to do anything you don't want to do, you have the right to see a different doctor.

AGA is committed to continuously advocating for the adoption of the Informed Consent model for trans and gender diverse clients, which we do through trainings, consultations and outreach. Furthermore, Capital Health Network (a Canberra-based information platform for healthcare professionals) has a useful guide for doctors without experience or specialisation in trans and/or gender diverse affirmative healthcare called "Trans Health Pathways". While this platform is not available to the public, any healthcare professional operating within Canberra will be able to access it through the Health Pathways system. So if you feel comfortable with a particular doctor and want to continue seeing them, but you think they are inexperienced around trans and/or gender diverse healthcare, suggesting they look up the "Trans Health Pathways" might be a good starting point! You could also suggest that they contact AGA for some training and upskilling.

## Visiting Your GP

No matter what path you want to go down, a visit with a GP is probably going to mark the start of your medical transition. This can be a big step, but is critical to getting access to the medical options you want to affirm your identity. Friendly doctors do exist, check out our referrals list if you need help finding one.

It's good to be prepared going into this first consultation, and to be aware that it is likely to take more than one visit to the GP (and potentially other specialists) before you can begin any treatment or undergo surgery. It's good to book a longer consultation for your first conversation about transition with a GP. A longer session gives you more time to talk about what's going on for you, and might help you feel less rushed in telling your story.

Your first discussion with your GP about wanting to undergo a medical transition is likely to cover the following things:

- The nature, duration and history of your feelings towards your gender identity and/or sex assigned at birth
- Previous medical history (such as prescribed and non-prescribed medications, including any self-medicated hormone therapy\*, and any medical conditions you may have)
- Drug and alcohol history
- Sexual health history
- Mental health conditions (such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, autism spectrum disorder) Social history (who are your support people, who do you live with and so on)

For some, these first consultations can feel confronting, invasive or challenging, or like frustrating hurdles in a 'gatekeeping' medical system. For others, these conversations are relieving and empowering - and represent being one step closer to affirming their gender. The best thing you can do is find a doctor that feels right for you, and with whom you can be open and honest. It's ok to see a different doctor if you didn't feel comfortable with the first person you saw. In fact, you can see as many doctors as you need to, until you find someone you feel comfortable with.

## Specialist Referrals

In order to progress your medical transition, a GP might ask you to see other specialists for further discussions or to get one or more tests done (for example a blood test, sex chromosome test or a bone density scan). It is difficult to provide a firm guideline on the kinds of specialists you might end up seeing, or the kinds of tests you might have. This will depend upon your personal mental and physical health, and the discussions you have with your doctor.

It is a reality that people have very varied experiences regarding this part of their transition. Unfortunately, there are no standard pathways and procedures in the Australian medical system regarding medical gender affirmation, meaning some doctors might refer you to specialists, while others do not. AGA is working with the ACT medical sector to improve their approach to trans and gender diverse health.

The best information we can provide here is to describe the kinds of specialists you may or may not end up seeing, and the kinds of discussions and tests you might have, so that you can feel a bit more prepared. It's also important to know that this isn't a comprehensive list, depending on your circumstances, your doctor may want you to see a different type of specialist.

## **Psychologist/Psychiatrist**

Psychologists and psychiatrists are professionals who specialise in mental health. As we noted above, many GPs and surgeons will require you to see a psychologist or psychiatrist before you can begin HRT or have surgery. This can feel like a hurdle to clear, or that you're being tested by the psychologist or psychiatrist. However with a good psychologist or psychiatrist this process should feel like an organic discussion and an opportunity for you to tell your story.

Stigma and minority stress can deeply impact trans and gender diverse people, and poor mental health statistics in our communities are disproportionately high. Transitioning can be a very stressful time and it can be very helpful to have a supportive psychologist or psychiatrist who can help you manage this stress. For this reason, you and your doctor might deem it a good idea to seek out some mental health support regarding your medical transition even if they do use an Informed Consent model.

Talking with your GP about creating a mental healthcare plan will give you access to significantly subsidised services. Unfortunately, not all mental health professionals have a deep understanding of the experiences of trans and gender diverse people. If you feel like the psychologist or psychiatrist you see doesn't understand or respect your experiences, questions your identity or listens to you with judgement, you have the right to ask to see someone else.

## **Endocrinologists**

An endocrinologist is a doctor who specialises in hormones. Every person's body has different levels of hormones, and some doctors think it's important to know a person's current hormone levels before prescribing Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). Young people who have not yet started puberty, or are in the early stages of puberty, may be more likely to be referred to an endocrinologist, in order to assess the hormone changes their bodies are undergoing.

Depending on your medical history and any pre-existing medical conditions you might have, a GP may also refer you to an endocrinologist to assess and manage the impact of potential side effects of HRT.

Others might be asked to see an endocrinologist later in their transition once they have already started HRT. GPs may refer you to an endocrinologist to check the levels of HRT you are on during your transition or because your body is not reacting in the expected way to HRT, or if you are going to change the hormone treatment you are currently being prescribed.

Finally, you might be tested to see whether or not you have an intersex variation (see our explainer of intersex), however this is not particularly common practice.

### **Sexual Health Specialists**

Sexual Health Physicians are GPs who have additional specialist training in managing sexually transmitted diseases, sexual relationships problems, and family planning and contraception. In addition to this many sexual health specialists also have a lot of knowledge working with trans and gender diverse people. In the ACT the Canberra Sexual Health Centre has a large amount of experience in this area and is a good place to seek support related to a medical transition. You can see them independently or you might be referred to them by a GP for help starting or managing HRT. In addition to this, you can also see them if you need support relating to sexual health needs - such as a STI or HIV test, or information about safe sex practices (including PreP or how HRT might affect other forms of contraception).

### **Fertility Specialists**

While there is some disagreement within the medical community, some medical transitions and some surgeries can make you infertile. A doctor might ask if this is something you have considered, and offer solutions such as freezing eggs or sperm. You are not required to do this, and should not feel pressured to do so, but it is an option that you might wish to explore with your doctor or with a fertility specialist if you're interested in having biological children in the future.

## **Other Medical Options**

AGA's peer support workers can provide more detail about other medical pathways based on their own lived experience of the health system. These may include details about specific hormones that masculinise or feminise the body as well as information about a range of surgical options. Please note that we are not medical service and none of the options that we provide constitute medical advice. If you're interested in more detail about these options and where to get good medical support please email [support@genderrights.org.au](mailto:support@genderrights.org.au).



For many trans and gender diverse people, changing their name and/or their registered sex on legal and other documents is an integral step in their transition process. These processes are relatively straightforward in the ACT. Here you can find a number of links for relevant services and application forms.

## Applying to Change your Name

Legal name changes on the Australian Births, Deaths and Marriages Register in the ACT happen through Access Canberra, and applications can be lodged online, in person or by mail. To apply you must complete an Application to register a change of name for an adult and meet the following criteria: You are 18 years of age or older You provide your birth certificate You were born in the ACT or can prove you are a permanent resident of the ACT (details about how to prove residency are listed on the second page of the application) You can find Access Canberra's official site regarding the application to change a name [here](#).

For people under the age of 18, a parent or guardian currently needs to apply on your behalf, but this requires a different application form. This form can be downloaded from [here](#).

Whether you apply in person or by mail, don't forget about the proof of identity material. A full list of acceptable identification materials is on the second page of the application form. These applications carry a fee, which varies depending on whether you want a new certificate printed or not. You can find a list of fees [here](#).

## Changing your Sex on the Birth Register

Another consideration you might also make in regards to legally transitioning is to change your sex as it appears on the birth register. In the ACT, there are currently three categories which can appear as your registered sex. They are female (F), male (M), or indeterminate/unspecified/intersex (X). Your application can be lodged online, in person or by mail. This process is slightly different to changing your name, you need to complete an Application to alter birth register to record a change of sex and meet the following criteria:

- You are 18 years of age or older
- Your birth was registered in the ACT (i.e. you have an ACT birth certificate)
- You have a "Declaration in Support of a Change of Sex" from a doctor or psychologist. This form can be found on Access Canberra's website, listed below.

You can find a full description of the application process and requirements on Access Canberra's website [here](#).

If you are not over 18, your parent/guardian is able to apply on your behalf as long as you meet the second and third criteria. When applying online, select "No" when asked: "Is this your birth certificate?", and you will be prompted to select that the application is on the behalf of your child. Note that if the name of both parents are on the birth registration, then the consent of both parents is required. If the other parent is deceased, a copy of a death certificate is required to be provided with the application. If you were not born in the ACT (i.e. you do not have an ACT birth certificate) but you are a permanent resident of the ACT, you can apply to have your sex officially recognised in the ACT by applying for a Recognised Details Certificate, info for which is available [here](#).

Details for how to prove your ACT residency are listed on the application form. These applications carry a fee, which varies depending on whether you want a new certificate printed or not. Note that lodging the Declaration of Support does not carry an additional fee. You can find a list of fees [here](#).

## Changing the Details on your Driver's License

While your sex/gender marker does not appear on your physical license in the ACT, you will also need to change your details on your driver's licence record once you have successfully been granted a new certificate from Access Canberra acknowledging your change of name and/or sex. The update will be provided free of charge, and can be done either in person or online. You will just need to provide a copy of your updated certificate with the correct details from Access Canberra. You can find information about replacing a driver's licence [here](#):

It is important to make these changes relatively quickly, as you risk driving with an invalidated licence once you have officially changed your name.

## Changing the Details on a Passport

Australian citizens who have legally changed their name due to a gender transition are usually eligible for a free replacement of their passport as long as their current passport is valid for at least two more years. You can lodge your application either in person or online. There are also three options for sex/gender markers available from the Australian Government - M, F or X. It is possible to nominate a different sex for your passport than the one that is listed on your birth certificate, so some people might choose to change their passport before changing the sex listed on their birth certificate. General information and the relevant forms can be found [here](#).

In order to apply for the replacement, you will need to complete the following steps:

- Provide your new Australian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages Certificate as proof of your legal name change

- Complete a full application for a new passport (not a renewal)
- Have a doctor or psychologist complete a Declaration: gender change in travel document

Please also be aware that a passport with an X sex marker may restrict your ability to travel overseas as some countries do not recognise it as a valid passport. If you are seeking a passport with an X marker it is worth considering whether you are likely to travel internationally and where to. You can contact DFAT or the nearest Australian Embassy for the country you wish to travel to for more information.

## **Other Means of Legal Identification**

While your sex/gender marker does not appear on your physical license in the ACT, you will also need to change your details on your driver's licence record once you have successfully been granted a new certificate from Access Canberra acknowledging your change of name and/or sex. The update will be provided free. Once you have changed your name and/or sex marker, there are other places where you will have to update your details. These places include all other government services (Centrelink, the Australia Taxation Office, Medicare etc), as well as other places that require you to use your legal name (for example banking, school and university records, medical offices, superannuation funds, insurance agencies etc). There might also be other places where you may wish to update your details, such as cinema memberships, local sporting groups, gym memberships and so on. For the most part, changing your details with these services will require you to have already officially changed your name (and sometimes sex marker as it appears on your birth certificate), so adjusting your details on the birth register is the best place to start and will make future steps more straightforward.



For many trans and gender diverse people, the very first steps taken in a transition will involve some, a combination of, or all of the points of social transition described on this page. These are ways of inhabiting, affirming and exploring your gender identity that do not require the same sort of significant decisions to be made that are discussed in our legal and medical transition sections. This is not to make light of the options presented here. For some people, their gender identity can be completely affirmed through social transition. For others, legal or medical avenues might not be possible or affordable, or they might be things that someone is aspiring towards in the future. Every trans and gender diverse person's transition looks different - and that's okay! Whatever your situation is, your identity and experiences are not more or less valid.

## "Coming Out"

Telling people that you are trans, gender diverse or questioning your gender identity in some way, can be liberating, exciting, terrifying - or all of these things at once! Some people come out loudly, while others might only tell one or two very close friends or loved ones. Some people will be out at home and in their personal life, but not at school, university or work, and some people might be out everywhere. The most important thing you can do is to transition at a pace that makes you feel comfortable and safe. Who you tell, and when you tell people, should always be a decision made by you.

Going to venues where you feel safe to affirm or start exploring your gender is a crucially important step for many trans and gender diverse people. The social events at AGA offer an environment where you can come as your authentic self, get some support and meet people who have similar experiences to you. We offer a range of different events for people of all ages - check out our rolling calendar!

Furthermore, we also know that coming out to people, and having to explain your identity to people can feel exhausting. Many resources exist that describe and explain transgender and gender diverse identities and experiences. Directing people in your life to do a bit of their own research or providing them with information will take the burden off you from having to do all the explaining and educating. For example, take a look at our trans or gender diverse pamphlets here.

## Altering your Appearance

There are many ways you might alter your appearance as a part of your social transition in order for your physical expression to better reflect your gender identity. Such alterations might include wearing different clothing, changing your hair, or using make-up.

It might also involve using assistive clothing to change how the shape of your body appears.

**If you're seeking to make your body appear more feminine you might want to explore:**

**Tucking** - a technique used to hide your genitals. While tucking can be done with sports tape, you can also buy a 'gaffe', which is specially designed underwear to help with this. It might be a good idea to ease your way into tucking by doing it just for an hour or two at a time first before working your way up to longer periods of time.

**Padding** - using padding to accentuate your breasts, hips, and/or butt. There are a wide range of different ways to do this, and products available to help you so it's worth doing some research online or talking to another trans/gender diverse person about it if you feel comfortable.

**If you're seeking to make your body appear more masculine you might want to explore:**

**Binding** - where you bind your chest to make it appear flat. It can be dangerous to use bandages or tape to do this. Instead there are commercially available binders specially made for this purpose and AGA has a binder program if you're unable to buy one yourself. It's very important to make sure you get the right size, so it's a good idea to ease your way into binding by doing it just for an hour or two at a time first to check that your binder is comfortable before working your way up to longer periods of time.

**Packing** - is the practice of 'packing' something in your pants to create a bulge. This could be anything from a rolled up sock, to a silicone prosthetic designed for the purpose.

Keep in mind that some practices, like binding and tucking, need to be done with the right materials, in a safe manner and shouldn't be done for extended periods of time. You can find information online about these practices, or if you feel comfortable, ask other trans/gender diverse people about how to practise these safely, or discuss it with your GP.

At first, you might only feel comfortable making changes to your appearance at home or around certain people. For others, being able to wear the clothes they want (including school/work uniforms) is essential to affirming their identity, and something they might choose to do early on. Take it at a pace that feels comfortable to you.

## **Trying New Names or Pronouns**

Choosing a name (if you want to use a different name) and beginning to use different pronouns (such as they/them, she/her, he/him) that align with your gender identity is often a very important step for trans and gender diverse people. Once again, you might only feel comfortable to ask certain people in your life to start using a different name and pronoun, or you might want everyone in your life to start using them!

We understand that it's hard to be misgendered or called the wrong name, but it's likely to happen in these early stages. People in your life might take a little while to catch on, and will adjust at different paces. It might be tricky and hurtful - but trying to be patient in these early stages will make this process easier for both you and others. Remember, there is a difference between making mistakes and someone trying to purposefully hurt you, so if you think someone's made a genuine slip-up, allow them a little grace, and hopefully with time, they will start doing better. It will feel amazing when they get it right! You could also give permission to some close friends/loved ones to correct people if they are misgendering you, or using the wrong name for you, so you don't have to do that work all the time.

If you find yourself feeling unsure about the name or pronouns that feel right for you, finding a group of people with whom you feel safe to experiment can be a really useful experience. You might even want to try out a few different names or pronouns. Even if you do have a name and pronouns that you prefer, when people first start using these to refer to you it can feel quite odd or weird. That doesn't necessarily mean that they're wrong, it can just take some time to adjust. Give yourself time to explore all these feelings and remember that you can always change these if they don't end up feeling right for you. A place like AGA is a great place to start exploring!

Once you start feeling certain and comfortable, you might consider legally changing your name and/or sex/gender marker on official documentation. See our legal transition information for more! As with everything though, there is no need to do this if you don't want to.

## **Voice Therapy**

For many people, voice and talking styles are another important aspect of embodying their gender identity. Voice therapy - where you are trained by a speech pathologist to alter your pitch, intonation and style of inflection - is another popular social transition option for trans and gender diverse people.

For people affirming a male or more masculine identity, if you choose to use testosterone it will widen the vocal cords, causing your pitch to lower and leading to a more typically masculine voice. For many people, this is enough. For others, including some who don't want to use testosterone, voice therapy helps them to embrace their voice more confidently.

For people affirming a female or more feminine identity, taking oestrogen won't do a lot to change the pitch of your voice. You might wish to have voice therapy to learn how to alter the pitch of your voice in your day-to-day life to speak at a higher pitch.

As is the case for any kind of specialist service, these sessions are not cheap. There are many free videos on the internet where you can pick up masculinising and feminising vocal techniques. This might be a good place to start to see if voice therapy is for you!