

## I've always been a woman

So there I was at the doctor's office. The nurse who checked me in was running through the usual list of questions. But then she asked, "Are you pregnant? Have you ever been pregnant?"

I looked at her in disbelief. "Come here," I said, telling her to lean in close so I could whisper. "I can't get pregnant."

"Oh, are your eggs not receptive?" she asked.

"Um, I ain't got no uterus." I said.

There was a ten second pause, which was really awkward. Finally I told her, "I'm transsexual."

The nurse blinked, and then said, "Oh, let me get the doctor!"

### About me

I identify as both transgender and as a woman. On an everyday basis I simply identify as female. But for education or support for other trans women I identify as transgender. My body may have started out as "male" but I've always been a woman. As a young girl I was always dainty and dressed in gender-neutral clothing. By my junior year in high school I started dressing more feminine. At age 19 I started taking hormones to help my body look more like I felt inside.

### Getting on hormones

Before a doctor would prescribe hormones I had to first get a note from a therapist, so I went to find one at Pathways Counseling. Before they could see me they needed to make sure I had insurance to cover the therapy. I was on BadgerCare at the time and that covered the therapy.

My therapist was very favorable towards me and asked questions about my life like, "When did I know I was a woman?", "How do my parents take it?", "When did I first come out in public?", and "How do I feel about people and their responses to me?" It was nice to be interviewed and by someone who wanted to know my story and actually seemed to care.

I had to see that therapist until she was content to diagnose me with Gender Identity Disorder. You have to have this diagnosis before a doctor will provide you with hormones and help you with transition. I saw her once a week for about a month and half. Each session was an hour.

Finally she gave me the papers that certified that I was in fact a woman. I took it to the DMV to get my identity markers changed on the appropriate forms and places. I am now legally recognized as a woman in the state of Wisconsin. Along with those papers she gave me a doctor's number at the MLK Heritage Center, so I called and made an appointment.

### **At the doctor's office**

At the doctor's office they took blood to check my testosterone levels and figure out how much of a dosage to give me. That was pretty easy - they wrote out my first prescription at the appointment. There are many ways you can take hormones. I started out taking it through a patch, then switched to oral hormones. There wasn't a particular reason I switched to pills, although the corners of the patches kept peeling up and I had to keep pushing them back down. I got irritated at that.

They also gave me a physical while I was there. The doctor asked a lot of personal questions like "Are you having sex?" and "Are you receiving or giving?" A staff member at the Project Q, a center for LGBTQ youth in Milwaukee, warned me to expect him to be blunt. It wasn't bad, really, and he had to ask them to know what to check for. But when he asked, "Are you the one sticking it in or getting stuck?", I was like, "Oh my goodness!" and "Booooy!" I couldn't believe he was asking those questions. You always have a choice whether you want to answer them or not. I say answer the questions because the doctors are there to help you get to where you want to be.

He checked my testicles for lumps and did the whole turn your head and cough thing. He also did a rectal exam which involved him inserting a gloved and lubed up finger in my butt. It didn't hurt but it was weird. It was also quick. He pushed downward and then to either side. When he pushed down on my prostate it felt weird and tingly.

Throughout the entire exam he explained what he was doing, which was helpful.

### **Being on hormones**

Different bodies are going to respond differently to hormones. Despite what you might hope or think, the truth is that taking more hormones than recommended will not speed up the process or have more dramatic results. Your breasts and hips might change a little or a lot. You can get an estimate of how much your body might change from looking at other women in your family. But remember, you might have to wait at least two years for full progression. Also, once you start taking hormones you'll basically be going through puberty again. If anyone asks, just tell them you are a late bloomer!

You should get your prescription for hormones from your doctor. I know some people, for a whole number of reasons, get their hormones in other ways. If you are on street hormones (or street 'mones), you should still see your doctor, because they can tell you how to take them safely. Doctors can measure your testosterone level to determine how much of that they need to block. You have to know so you don't overdose. Too much of the wrong amount of hormones can increase your blood pressure and increase your chance for heart attack and stroke.

My advice to other young trans people is that it's best to be more open with your doctor. I used to be "No way in hell are you going to see my secrets. No way I'm going to tell you I'm trans." But if you don't they are not going to be able to help you the way you need them too. If they know you are trans they'll know to ask certain questions. For instance, if you are taking hormones they should ask how long you have been on them, and if they are prescription or street 'mones.

### **Getting tested for HIV and other STIs**

My spouse and I went to get tested together. We went to another Milwaukee clinic for this. We didn't make an appointment, we just walked in. The person at the reception desk gave us a ticket and directed us to the waiting room. We went in early so we didn't have to wait very long, but if you don't make an appointment you can expect a several-hour wait sometimes.

My name was called and I was brought to an examination room. I said that I wanted to get the usual STI (sexually transmitted infection) and HIV check. They asked a whole lot of questions, like if I'm currently sexually active, what types of sex I've done, if I have received or given anal sex, if I have received or given oral sex, the number of partners I've had, if I currently have a partner, and so on.

They drew blood and also swabbed my anus as part of the tests. They also had me urinate in a cup. They let me know that my results would be ready in about a week. I had to follow up with them to get the results.

### **Advice for other young people**

Be sure to observe people. There are some people out there who will pay attention to you because you are young and good looking. Be careful, because they might turn out to be a jerk, have a record, have an infection, or whatever. Get to know a person and take your time. There's no rush to jump into bed with somebody.

Always stick to one partner and use protection for every single thing you do. You don't want to catch a disease. I've heard stories from people who caught an STI. I don't know which STI they caught but they said it felt like razors when they peed. Who wants that? When it comes to getting tested, don't be hesitant to go. You should want to know your status. You shouldn't have to wonder, "Do I have anything?" You only have one body, so protect it.

## Discussion Questions

1. What surprised you about this story? What new information did you learn from reading it?
2. Do you think Pebbles had a good experience at the doctor's office? Why or why not? How common do you think Pebbles' experience is for other transgender youth?
3. What did you think about the nurse at the beginning of the story? What assumptions did she make? What did you think of Pebbles' response to the nurse? What else could she have done?
4. What misconceptions about hormones did Pebbles identify? How could this be helpful information to other trans women who are considering taking hormones?
5. Pebbles talks about the importance of getting tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Why do you think some people are hesitant to get tested? What could you say to a friend who doesn't want to get tested? What about to a significant other?