

Understanding Medically Necessary Care for Transgender People

Transgender people, like anyone else, need to be able to go to the doctor when they're sick and to have access to health care that helps them be healthy and well. Many transgender people also need medical care that helps them live as their authentic gender.

Gender dysphoria is the medical diagnosis that describes the intense psychological distress that transgender people feel when they aren't able to live as who they truly are. Every major U.S. medical association recognizes gender dysphoria as a serious medical condition and recommends that transgender people have access to the safe, effective treatment outlined in the evidence-based guidelines and standards of care maintained by expert professional associations such as:

- American Academy of Pediatrics¹
- Endocrine Society²
- Center of Excellence for Transgender Health³
- World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH)⁴

Treatment for gender dysphoria is individualized and age-appropriate. For transgender young people, care involves in-depth consultation and coordination between mental health professionals, doctors, and parents. No medical interventions occur for children before puberty. At puberty, the standard of care for decades has been reversible medications that temporarily pause puberty to give the young person time to think through their health care needs. Older transgender adolescents may begin hormone therapy after consultation with their doctor and parents. Surgeries for older transgender adolescents are exceptionally rare and happen only when gender dysphoria is so intense that it can't be fully treated in any other way. For all transgender people, these personal and private health care decisions are guided by the expertise of medical professionals.

What does the research say?

A strong and well-established body of evidence, developed over more than 40 years, demonstrates that individualized and age-appropriate care for transgender people improves mental health and overall well-being at all ages. The positive effects of this care include decreases in depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, as well as improvements in quality of life and body satisfaction. These peer-reviewed research studies have been published in internationally respected journals such as the *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, and *Pediatrics*.

- A 2023 study found that transgender adolescents who received hormone therapy over the course of two years had significantly decreased depression and anxiety symptoms, as well as improvements in life satisfaction.⁵
- A 2015 study found improved psychological and social functioning among transgender adolescents who received puberty delay medications.⁶
- A 2022 study found 60% lower odds of depression and 73% lower odds of suicidality among transgender youth after starting puberty delay medications or hormone therapy.⁷
- A 2023 randomized controlled trial found that transgender people who had immediate access to hormone therapy—rather than waiting three months to start treatment—experienced a 52% reduction in suicidality (compared to only 5% for those who had to wait to start treatment), as well as substantial decreases in depression and gender dysphoria.⁸

The research also illuminates the concrete harms on the mental health and well-being of transgender people when medically necessary care is banned. Currently, more than 146,000 transgender youth have lost or are at risk of losing access to essential health care as a result of state bans.⁹ Transgender adults have also lost health care access in several states.¹⁰

- A 2022 survey of transgender youth found that 86% reported negative impacts on their mental health because of state laws restricting the rights of transgender people.¹¹
- A 2020 study showed that transgender adolescents who did not receive appropriate medical treatment had poorer psychological health compared to their transgender peers who could access care.¹²
- A 2022 study found higher odds of lifetime suicidal ideation among transgender adults who could not access medical care during their adolescence.¹³

Where do professional medical associations stand?

Every major U.S. medical and mental health professional association supports access to this essential medical care to improve the health and well-being of transgender people.¹⁴ These expert associations represent millions of health professionals across the country in fields spanning psychiatry, adolescent medicine, psychology, endocrinology, pediatrics, and many others.

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)

“Gender-affirming care is informed by long-standing standards of care and by evidence-based clinical studies supporting improved mental health and health outcomes for youth...AACAP has strongly advocated for gender-affirming evidence-based care and vehemently opposes efforts to block access to care.”¹⁵

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)

“The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that youth who identify as transgender have access to comprehensive, gender-affirming, and developmentally appropriate health care that is provided in a safe and inclusive clinical space.”¹⁶

American Medical Association (AMA)

“The AMA opposes the dangerous intrusion of government into the practice of medicine and the criminalization of health care decision-making...Gender-affirming care is medically-necessary, evidence-based care that improves the physical and mental health of transgender and gender-diverse people.”¹⁷

American Psychological Association (APA)

“There is no scientific or health justification for legislation which restricts access to gender-affirming care...APA Division 44 affirms the legitimacy of gender affirming care and stands in strong opposition to attempts by local, state, and federal governmental bodies to misinform the public, interfere in the patient-provider relationship, and infringe upon the rights of transgender and gender diverse people and their families to seek and receive appropriate care and accommodations which evidence indicates is supportive of their health.”¹⁸

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