

Just for a second, put down this book and look at the people who are around you. You might see your parent or a sibling, or maybe a group of your friends. Chances are, all these people look and act pretty different from you.



They might have different skin colors, different personalities, or different hair.

They might love different people or have different musical tastes.

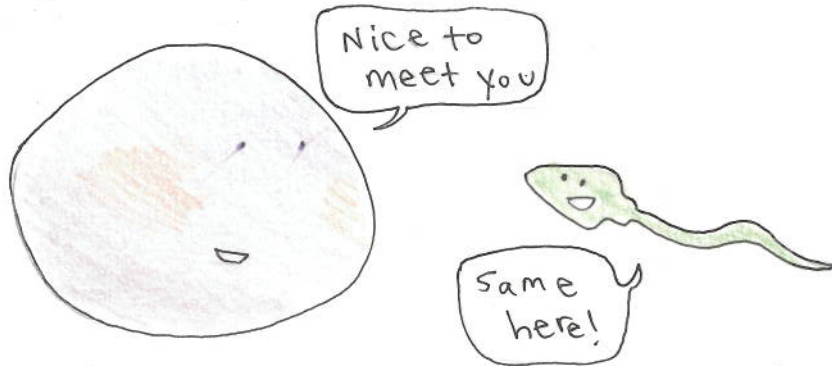
They might also have different sex organs.

This kind of difference and diversity is what makes our world exciting.

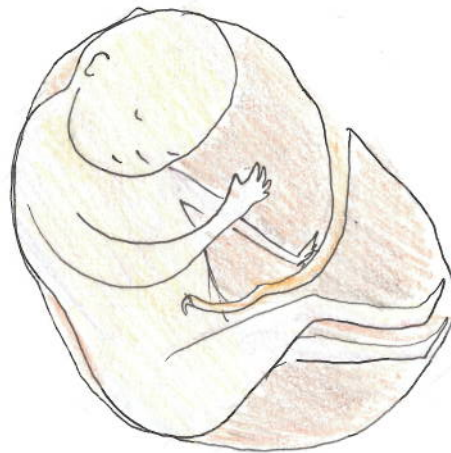
Imagine how boring it would be if everybody looked and felt exactly the same!

So, where does this diversity in sex organs come from?

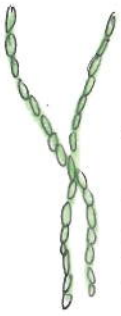
The story always begins with an **egg** and a **sperm**. Both the egg and the sperm are **gametes**, or cells that reproduce sexually. An egg is a big gamete produced by a female human, and a sperm is a small gamete produced by a male human.



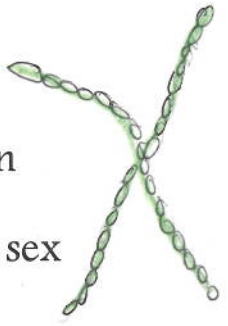
When the male and female gametes come into contact, they fuse their **genes** together. Genes are the biological instruction sheets that helped make you who you are. These two sets of genes create an **embryo**, or the beginnings of a baby. So all the wonderfully different humans you see around you started off in the same way—as an embryo produced by a sperm and an egg.



Now, here's where the fun part starts.

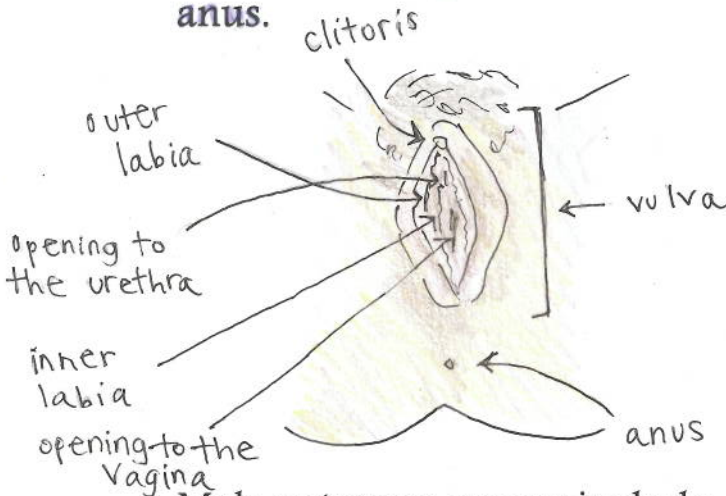


The sperm and the egg each have 23 **chromosomes**, or long, thin strings made up of tiny genes. Usually, one of each of these 23 chromosomes is a **sex chromosome** that will help determine the sex of the embryo.

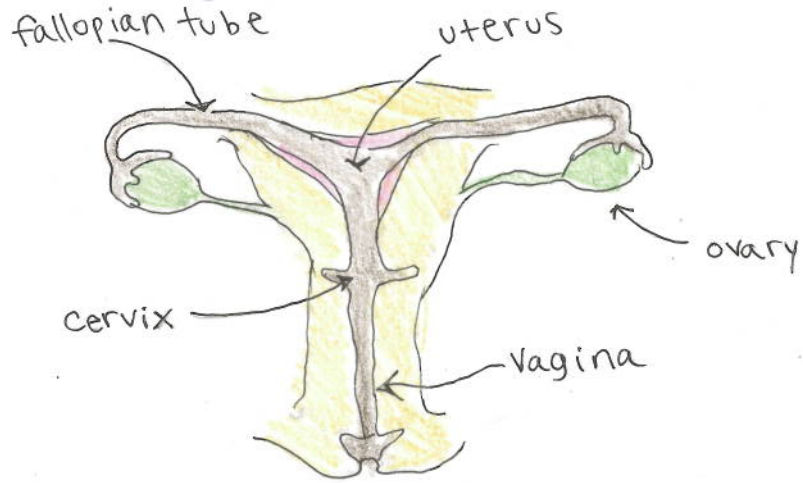


When I use the word "sex", I'm referring to outer and inner sex organs.

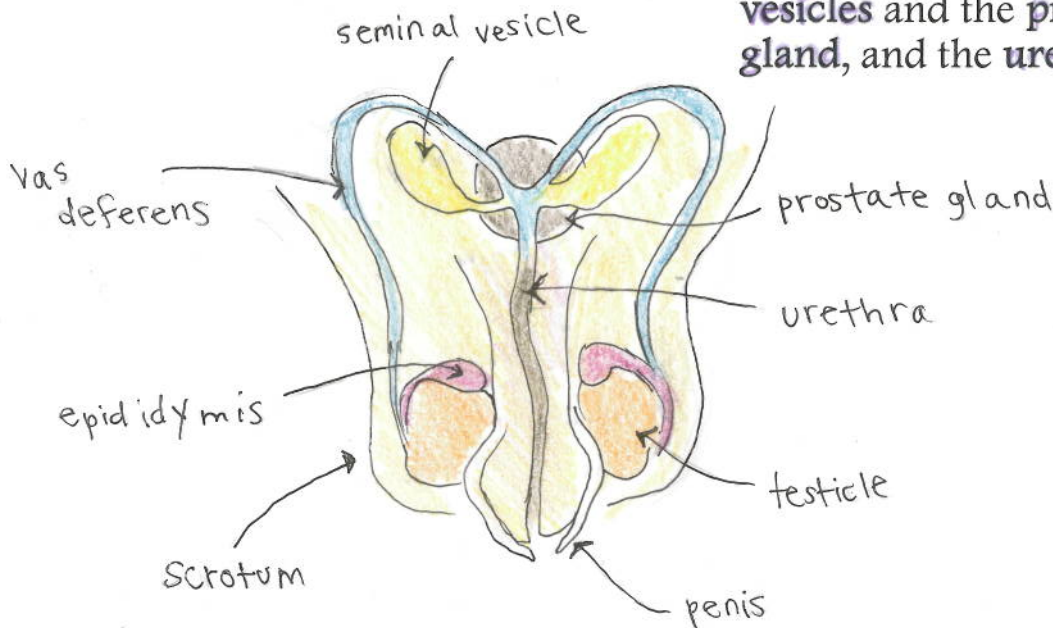
Female outer sex organs include the **vulva**, the **labia**, the **clitoris**, the **openings to the urethra and vagina**, and the **anus**.



Female inner sex organs include the **ovaries**, the **uterus**, the **fallopian tubes**, the **cervix**, and the **vagina**.



Male outer sex organs include the **scrotum**, the **penis**, and the **anus**.



Male inner sex organs include the **testicles**, the **epididymis**, the **vas deferens**, the **seminal vesicles** and the **prostate gland**, and the **urethra**.

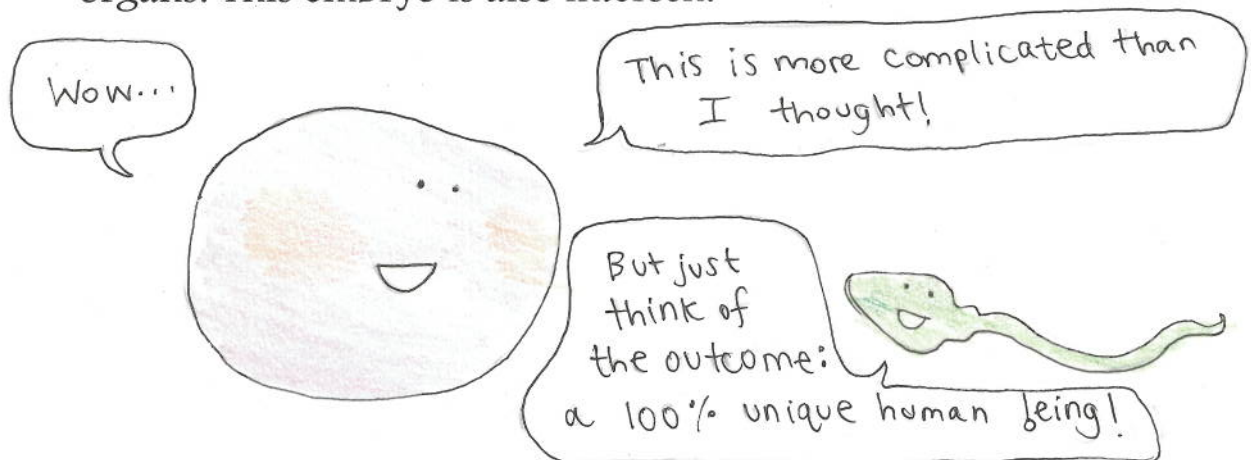
Now that we know the female and male sex organs, it's time to get back to our story!

The egg contains an **X** sex chromosome, and the sperm often contains either an **X** or a **Y** sex chromosome. The combination of an X and an X often leads to a female embryo, or an embryo that will have female sex organs. The combination of X and Y often leads to a male embryo, or an embryo that will have male sex organs.

Sometimes, there's a combination of more than two sex chromosomes. For example, there can be combinations of XXY, or XXYY, or XXX. These combinations sometimes produce female sex organs, sometimes produce male sex organs, and sometimes produce a little bit of both. When sex organs are not completely female or completely male, they're called **intersex**.

The Y chromosome gets its punch from a little gene called **SRY**. This gene tells the embryo to develop male sex organs. Without the Y chromosome, male sex organs don't develop, and the embryo produces female sex organs instead.

But even here, there can be diversity! Sometimes, the X and Y chromosomes don't click in the way they usually do. This leads to an embryo that will develop female outer sex organs and male inner sex organs. This embryo is also intersex.



Even in the case that the egg and sperm produce an XX or an XY, there's bound to be difference in growth and development—that's the reason why you look different from your siblings or your friends.



Because of the rainbow of variation that happens when the sperm meets the egg, everyone's sex organs look different. There is no "either/or". There's a **spectrum** of human possibility. Your sex organs are on that spectrum because you're human!

Your sex organs are an important part of who you are, and that's why it's important to keep them healthy and clean by going to the doctor and washing regularly. But your sex organs are also only one part of who you are. Your family and friends love you for *all* of you—for your sex organs as well as for your smile, sassiness, and singing skills.



Dear Dia Vercitie:

The other day, I was peeing in the bathroom and noticed that the boy standing next to me was peeing from the tip of his penis. My pee comes out from a little below the tip of my penis. I always thought my penis was normal, but now I'm a bit worried.

Unhap-pee

Dear Unhap-pee,

Well, I've got news for you that should cheer you up. Your penis is normal! Your friend's penis is also normal. Some boys have a urethral opening at the tips of their penises, and about just as many have this opening a bit below the tip. Some other boys have their urethral openings on the shaft of the penis, or on the body wall. Although these last two locations are more rare, all the possible places you can pee from are normal!

Love,
Dia Vercitie

Dear Dia Vercitie,

I think my vagina might look different than other girls' I've seen, but I'm not sure. For one thing, there's this bit of skin dangling from it and I don't know if it's supposed to be there. I guess that's mostly it, but I still just want to make sure that everything's okay.

Confused

Dear Confused,

The piece of skin coming from your vulva is your clitoris. The clitoris is an important part of your sex organs. Its only job is to feel good. Different girls have clitorises of different sizes. For some girls, the clitoris is as small as a pea. For others, the clitoris is a little bigger or a lot bigger. There's a whole range of clitoris size! As long as you feel healthy, everything is definitely okay.

Love,
Dia Vercitie