

Ask Matt: On Looking Male

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Abstract

Today we have a couple of letter related to “male” appearance and expression. I now turn it over to the writers. A reader writes: “I was looking back on an old post where you stated trans guys all ‘pass’ after x amount of time on testosterone. “I have now been on T seven years. I [...]

Article

Today we have a couple of letter related to “male” appearance and expression. I now turn it over to the writers.

A reader writes:

“I was looking back on an old post where you stated trans guys all ‘pass’ after x amount of time on testosterone.

“I have now been on T seven years. I have changed my documentation. I have a baritone voice. I still occasionally get read as female. This seems to occur more when I am in queer-friendly spaces, and if it happens where I can respond, I simply correct people and say, ‘It’s sir, actually’ or something similar.

“I think it’s important that trans men realize that sometimes you can do things ‘right’ (have a deep voice, act masculine, etc.) and your transition might still take a long, long time.”

It’s true. I have said in the past that, in general, trans guys will not be mistaken for female within a year or two of starting testosterone. And I think this is true for most trans guys - but there will always be exceptions. Transition is a process, not a product, and hormones are going to affect everyone differently.

Some people’s bodies just don’t process hormones in a “typical” or expected way. For some, the genetics just aren’t there for the physical changes that allow for complete assimilation as a “traditional” male (or female).

For me, I have had to accept the fact that I will be “ma’amed” at least 50 percent of the time on the telephone and at drive-thrus. I hate[pullquote align=”right”]You get what you get, and you don’t know what that will be until you get there.[/pullquote] it, but I don’t think that it will ever change. I don’t have a super-deep voice, but it’s not the deepness that is the problem - it’s the inflection or modulation. My voice is all over the place - up, down, and very expressive.

That is a “female” trait in our culture. I’ve tried the monotone thing, but I have to concentrate too hard, and if I’m not thinking about it, I revert right back. So that’s my annoyance, but it is minor.

I don't know how you look, act, or sound, but I think that queer-friendly spaces can sometimes be the most difficult for trans men who identify as men and who use male pronouns and titles. When I was first transitioning, I lived in what was considered to be a "gay" neighborhood. In my neighborhood, I got "ma'amed" all the time. But when I went to the suburbs, where gender roles and gender expression are much more established and binary, I always got "sirred."

In straight, traditionally binary spaces, expressions of masculinity are seen as male, and so those people in traditionally "male" clothing with a "male" haircut and "male" mannerisms are almost always seen as male. In more queer-friendly, non-traditional spaces, the lines are blurred.

People generally rely on their previous experiences to define their current experience. When their previous experiences with masculine-appearing, baritone-voiced people have shown those people to be male, that's the assumption they will make now and in the future. When their previous experiences with masculine-appearing, baritone-voiced people have been mixed, then they will make the assumption that is most in line with what has happened for them in the past - which might have been that those people were female.

It's a pain. But you're right - although testosterone generally makes it pretty easy for trans guys to quickly assimilate into the culture as men if they choose, it doesn't happen for everyone. Age, genetics, and other factors will always play a role. It's definitely a process - and it's also a crap shoot. You get what you get, and you don't know what that will be until you get there.

Transitioned readers, what has been your experience with others' gender perceptions of you after many years, and how have you adjusted to any problems, or what have you done to mitigate them?

A reader writes:

"I'm a 20-year-old female. I've been researching sex reassignment surgery and it's not something I think I'd ever be interested in going through. I'm looking for different ways of expressing maleness. I've recently begun fixing my closet to 'guy gay/fashionably butch' attire, which I like. My voice is naturally flat and low, which I like.

"I also want to achieve a more masculine body shape through building muscle, which I know will be limited by lack of testosterone injections. I already have a good build; I'm tall, broad-shouldered, solid, with decent muscle already, especially in the legs. I'm most interested in shoulders, arms, and abs.

"Do you have any suggestions for products I can use that aren't injections - maybe creams, supplements, etc.? Any way to alter where weight accumulates? Other suggestions would be great." It sounds as if you've got a good start with regard to the body shape that you want. There are testosterone gels or patches that you can use in place of an injection, but they will also give you other male characteristics, such as a deeper voice, facial hair, and possibly body hair. They will act on your body just like injections would, and it doesn't sound as if this is what you want.

I know that some people also use DHEA supplements, which can be purchased over the counter at health stores, as an alternative to testosterone, but I think reviews are mixed with regard to how beneficial DHEA is. It also appears that it can produce some masculinization in females similar to the results of testosterone, which I'm not sure you want.

I would recommend that you look at both male and female body-building magazines - male magazines to provide you with exercises for the appearance that you want, and female magazines to provide you with diet and supplement tips that help females build muscle without the benefits of testosterone.

Also, if you can afford it, you might want to buy a couple of sessions with a personal trainer and describe to him or her the body shape that you want. That person can probably give you some advice on what to do to get as close as possible to that shape.

Estrogen will determine how and where your body fat is distributed, which will affect your body shape. But you can work particular muscles to try to counteract or balance that as much as possible. For example, if your hips are very wide because of fat that is distributed there (you can't change your pelvic bone structure, which will generally be wider than a non-trans man's), you can build up your shoulders to balance that out so that your bottom half doesn't appear as wide.

I believe that I have both male and female readers who work out with weights and do a lot of body sculpting, so I'm hoping that readers will have other suggestions. I now turn it over to the brains (and bodies) of the operation.

Readers - thoughts?

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