

## **My Story - I was born without a Vagina**

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Just like Paddy Pascoe in *Footballers' Wives*, Becky Roche, 21 has congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH), which means she was born "intersex". The Condition makes her look more male than female. She tells '19' how it has affected her life

The other day I called up to renew my TV licence and the person on the other end of the phone said, 'That's fine now, Mr Roche.' I tried to explain that I'm not a Mr, I'm a Miss, but he wouldn't believe me. I was even told I had to write them a letter to verify my gender. Sounds mad, but at 21, I'm used to dealing with it because it's not the first time someone's mistaken me for a man over the phone. I have a very deep voice for a girl because I have a condition called congenital adrenal hyperplasia, or CAH, which means that when I was born it was hard to tell if I was a boy or a girl straight away.

"As a baby, I only had a lump of a clitoris on the outside that I peed through. Because the doctors were unsure of my sex, my parents were told to give me a unisex name like Leslie, but Mum says she always knew I was a girl, so they called me Rebecca.

"When I was six months old, the doctors operated on my clitoris and realigned my urethra so I could wee from the same place other girls do. They gave me outer and inner lips and formed a vagina, right up to my cervix. When the chromosome test results came back, they showed I was female. I'm glad I had the operation when I was young.

"Whenever I explain CAH to people, I try not to be too long-winded as it's confusing. Basically, my adrenal glands, which sit above the kidneys, don't work properly. In most people adrenal glands do hundreds of jobs, but mine don't secrete all the steroids I need into my blood stream. I don't make enough cortisol [the hormone which controls your blood sugar levels], and the harder my body tries to make it, the more it makes testosterone, the hormone which causes 'male' effects. This means I put on weight easily - by the age of seven I was nearly 12st (168 lbs) - and, from birth, I've had more facial hair and a deeper voice than other girls.

"By the time I was five, I was depressed by what I was going through - a few times the doctors thought I had meningitis, when it was just my sugar levels making me feel ill, but they gave me spinal taps which were horrific. There was less known about CAH then. At five, I saw a leading authority on CAH and he told me, 'The only thing we can do for a fat cow like you is to sew your mouth up.' I was so upset, my dad nearly punched him. You don't expect ignorance from someone in that position."

### **Bullying**

"Things got worse when I started school. I missed quite a bit due to hospital visits. I caught up all I could, but I'm also dyslexic, so that was a problem. Then there was the way the other kids

treated me. There are always fat kids, but I was really fat with a deep voice and sideburns. I got bullied nearly every day. They'd say things like, 'Is it a he or a she?' My legs were hairy too and some kids said they were like a dog's. I've always known I was different because my parents said there was something unique about me, so I tried to explain CAH to the other kids, but you always get ones who won't listen. When I was 13 I told everything to a girl I thought was my best friend. Within 24 hours, it was all over the school. I reacted by becoming a loner.

"You'd think that the taunts would've made me hate bullies, but when I was seven I became one. I'd pick on anyone who was smaller than me. I was just angry and retaliating against my life. I feel bad now because I did it for the sake of it. I started doing martial arts from the age of eight so I could have an outlet for my aggression.

"When I was 10 my parents announced they were getting divorced and I moved from Middlesex to Devon with my dad, while Mum went to Birmingham. That was hard - it's difficult enough to handle your parents splitting up and puberty, but I had CAH to deal with, too.

### **Puberty**

"Even though I have CAH, I'm still a girl, so watching the other girls go through the physical changes of puberty at school wasn't completely different. Sure, my 'male' side got worse and I was hairier than them, but I never got jealous as I was developing, too. I grew boobs a bit before them and they were a bit bigger- I'm a D-cup now- but I started my periods at 13 just like them. Instead of that making me feel more like a woman, I thought it was a right hassle, but I don't think I'm alone there! Some days, my appearance really got me down. I'd wake up, look in the mirror and think, 'I can't stand me.'

"The emotional changes were a different matter, though. I've never been girly. I used my long hair to cover up the extra hair on my face - I do that even now - and as I'm big I've always worn baggy clothes. When I went to girls' parties and the conversation turned to boys or clothes, I'd get bored. Even now, I hate shopping and don't wear make-up."

### **Sexuality**

"I think I've got quite a male outlook. Maybe it's having CAH, or maybe it's just me. When I was little, I'd rather be playing with air guns and I spent more time hanging out with boys at school. When they weren't teasing, they treated me like one of the lads. Maybe I acted more 'male' to fit in because I look more male than female.

"The idea of boyfriends never felt right - I couldn't imagine what anyone would see in me. I met Gareth through a drama group when I was 15 and then dated Barry when I was 17, but looking back I always knew I was gay. I never wanted to take it past the kissing stage and I've never slept with a man. I only dated boys to fit in. People ask me if I'm gay because of CAH, but I don't think so. You're either born to like one sex or the other and how can that be affected by your gender?"

"I was worried that people would treat me differently if I came out, but at 17 I told some of my girl mates. They were brilliant about it as soon as I reassured them I didn't fancy them! Mum was just as cool and my big sister had guessed ages ago. Dad still thinks it's a phase but I don't love him any less for it and I don't think he loves me any less, either. Living in a small place in Devon was alienating as there aren't many gay people. I ended up going out with Ellen because she was gay and interested in me!

"I met her at a friend's party - as soon as we kissed it felt right, but it was never destined to last. My current on-off girlfriend, Emma, is brilliant, but I didn't tell her I had CAH right off - I needed to get to know her first so I could guess how she'd react. I'm quite dark skinned, so I think she put my hairiness down to that. But one night, in a club, a bloke started taking the piss out of my facial hair. I was mad so shouted back: 'At least I can grow a decent beard!' Emma wanted to know what was going on and that's when I told her. She was pretty surprised but it's not an issue between us now. Our sexual relationship's perfectly normal, I can have orgasms, and she'll tell me if I need a shave. I've never given a girl stubble rash!

"Recently, I had keyhole surgery to remove my adrenal glands. It took five hours to remove each one. I noticed the differences straight away - my voice isn't as deep, I'm not as hairy and I've managed to get down to 9st (96 lbs). But now I have to take around four tablets a day depending on how I feel - which is better than the 10 a day I was on before! But if I don't take them properly, I'll die because I need the hormones they give me.

"For about two years, I went through a period of not taking my tablets properly because I realised that, if I didn't, I'd lose weight. I'd try to fool the doctors by going back on them whenever I knew I had a blood test, but one test showed them everything and the doctors told me I could die if I carried on. That was a massive wake-up call and I did as they said. My weight's always been my biggest issue and I am self-conscious about it. You see so many images of thin people being held up as the attractive ones, and sometimes I feel like I should fit into that to be normal. I'm only 5ft 2in and I'll never be like that. I was my heaviest at 16 when I was 14 stone (168 lbs). How can that not upset you some days?

"I left school at 16 and have had jobs working in factories, but I've never held one down for more than six months because I've felt depressed. But now I'm in adult education, which is great because it's helping me deal with my dyslexia, and hopefully I can get a job working with computers soon. Now, I just want to be accepted for who I am. And hopefully if more people learn about CAH and what it really is, one day that will happen."

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