

A Quick Guide to Obtaining Gender Affirming Surgery

Gender-affirming surgery is permanent, and the results can have both physical and mental health consequences. Therefore, choosing the right surgeon for you will involve deliberate and careful research in order to find one who is fully qualified and will meet your expectations. Your search will include lots of planning, letters of referral, and documentation gathering. We'll cover the basics here.

When starting your search for a surgeon, start by calling the number on the back of your health insurance card and ask if they cover your desired gender-affirming surgery. This will let you know if you will need to find a surgeon and practice in-network with your insurance or if you will need to pay fully out of pocket. Illinois Medicaid plans are required to cover gender-affirming surgeries defined as medically necessary by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), but expect to jump through some hoops.

Next, start calling surgical practices you are potentially interested in. We have listed some well-respected options to start with in Illinois, but you may also broaden your search by looking at transhealthcare.org. Ask about the process for scheduling a consultation and about the wait list for surgery. If using insurance, have your card available and make sure they accept your plan before moving forward. If you will be paying out of pocket, ask about cost, when payment is due, and if there are payment plans. Ask if you should expect a separate facility or hospital bill in addition to the surgeon's fee.

Gender Affirming Surgery in Illinois:

Gender Affirming Care at Rush Hospital - 888-352-7874

Northwestern Medicine Gender Pathways Program – 312-926-3866

Gender Affirming Surgery at UI Health - 312-355-6600

Gender Affirming Surgery at University of Chicago Medicine - 1-888-824-0200 and ask for the Trans CARE clinic

Dr. Alison Shore, Lakeview Plastic Surgery (inside Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center) – 773-883-8234

Dr. Victor Earl Stams, Carle Hospital, Champaign, IL - 217-902-7527

Dr. Khurram Rashid, Rashid Plastic Surgery, Peoria, IL – 309-670-0700

When you think you've found a surgeon or program that will work for you, do some research. If there is a specific approach or technique you are hoping for, check if it is in their wheelhouse. See if you can find pictures of the work these surgeons have done and make sure it aligns with your goals. If there aren't photos available online, it is common practice for them to share these with you at the consultation. It can also be useful to look up reviews online. Even if your options are limited, reading a review might help you prepare for what to expect.

Once you have chosen a surgeon, ask to schedule a consultation and make sure to ask for an informational packet with the surgeon's requirements for accepting patients. Most surgeons will require information including letters prior to your consultation.

For most gender-affirming surgeries, your insurance will require one mental health letter and one medical letter from your hormone provider. Genital surgeries usually require an additional mental health letter from a second mental health clinician. Planned Parenthood of Illinois can provide all of these letters for you to give to your surgeon or we can fax them directly to their office. Contact a case manager, call the PPIL contact center, or let your clinician know if you need surgery letters. A case manager or nurse will reach out to you to gather information for your medical letter and/or

schedule your behavioral health appointment(s). You will need one appointment with a Behavioral Health Clinician for each mental health letter. You do not need any additional appointments for medical letters. Your letters will need to be written within one year prior to your surgery date. Some insurance plans may require your medical letter be signed by an MD or DO (rather than an NP); if this is the case for you, be sure to let us know when requesting your medical letter. *Please note letter writing is currently only available to PPIL patients.*

Once you have scheduled your consultation, prepare a list of questions to bring to your appointment. You will have limited time with the surgeon, so use the time to make sure they are a good fit for you and you feel comfortable with their process. It can be helpful to bring a support person with you to keep notes, as you may receive an overwhelming amount of information. You may want to ask about the surgeon's training and experience; what surgical options are available and what procedure they think will best meet your goals; what results are reasonable for you to expect; options if you need a revision or don't like your results; what the surgery involves; possible complications and symptoms to watch for; pain management; the surgeon's rate of complications; length of the procedure; time in the hospital/facility; recovery time and what to expect during recovery; if you need to stop taking any medications prior to surgery; if you will receive detailed written pre- and post-op instructions; follow-up support and visit schedule; pre-surgical requirements including if there is a BMI requirement; and the prior authorization process. You should expect a physical exam at your consultation.

A note on bottom surgery: Phalloplasty and some types of vaginoplasty may require permanent hair removal to any areas of skin that will be used to construct internal organs. Your surgeon will need to let you know what areas will require hair removal for their approach. Hair removal may take several months to complete, so you will need to plan well in advance of your surgery. Some insurance plans may cover pre-surgical hair removal. We recommend asking your insurance what they will require for coverage. PPIL can provide letters of medical necessity for your insurance if needed.

Most surgeons will require medical clearance within 30 days of your surgery date. PPIL *cannot* provide pre-surgical labs, exams, or medical clearance letters; you will need to get these from a primary care provider or a clinic offering pre-surgical clearance services.

Finally, be patient and start planning ahead, speaking to your providers about your intentions, and gathering your letters in advance. This process may take months to complete and many surgeons have waitlists over a year long. If you have additional questions or need assistance navigating the surgery process, call your GAHT Case Manager, ask your clinician to get one in touch with you, or call PPIL at 877-200-7745.