

By: ~~October 2007~~, Science Editor

[The Phantom Penis - Is It Mere Imagination?](#)

Are we born with the sensation of having a penis?

The 'phantom limb' may sound more familiar to you. Amputees still feel their missing limb. But what about the phantom penis syndrome? It characterizes post-operative heterosexual and transsexual men who have removed penises due to cancer or trans-sex surgeries. A team at the University of California in San Diego, USA, discovered that 60 % of heterosexual men who had lost their penis due to cancer stated they still felt like having a penis, while the sensation persisted in just of 30 % of male-to-female operated transsexuals.

"We explain the absence or presence of phantoms in these subjects by postulating a hardwired gender-specific body image in the brain that does not match the external [birth] gender. Before birth the brain may develop an image of the body that may not necessarily match the physiological outcome," said lead researcher and phantom limb expert Vilayanur Ramachandran, a phantom limb expert. The UC team presented its work at the 2007 meeting of the Cognitive Neuroscience Society held in New York City. The team also investigated female-to-male transsexuals, finding that 60 % of them stated they experienced the sensation of bearing a phantom penis since early childhood. The team believes that this strengthens the concept that genital mapping of the body is hard-wired before birth, and could be a biological factor, predetermined before birth, explaining why transsexuals perceive a misfit between their 'gender identity' and their anatomical sex. The concept is in the cradle now, but it is based on how we perceive our body as being determined mostly by innate hard-wiring of our brains developed while we are in the womb. The phantom limb is another misfit between body image and reality reported by amputees who still "feel" their lost limb, but also by people born limbless. "Phantom limbs are purported to be the result of 'cross-wiring' in the nerves of the brain responsible for the missing limb and surrounding brain regions," wrote the researchers. The phantom penis could have a similar cause, and the patients could still describe the organ's shape and length and even the sensation of 'phantom erections'.