

Genital warts - Patient information leaflet

Key points

Warts are skin growths caused by a virus called HPV
HPV is passed from one person to another during sex
People can carry HPV but not always have obvious warts
You can reduce the risk of catching HPV by ALWAYS using condoms during sex

What are genital warts?

- ❖ Genital warts are caused by a virus called Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) which is a sexually transmitted infection.
- ❖ Only certain types of HPV cause genital warts.
- ❖ There are other types of HPV that do not cause genital warts but can cause abnormal (pre cancerous and if untreated may lead to cancer) changes in the cells at the neck of the uterus (the cervix), the anal canal, penis and vulva. It is possible to catch both types at the same time.

How do you get genital warts?

- ❖ The types of HPV that cause genital warts are different from those causing warts on other body parts, such as the hands. People do not usually get genital warts by touching warts on their hands or feet.
- ❖ Genital warts are spread by direct skin-to-skin contact during vaginal, anal, or possibly oral sex with someone who has this infection. Often, although the virus is in the skin, warts may never appear.
- ❖ Warts may appear within several weeks after sex with someone who has the wart-type of HPV, or they may take several months or years to appear.
- ❖ HPV may be more likely to be passed on when warts are present, but the virus can be transmitted even when there are no visible warts. This makes it hard to know exactly when or from whom you got the virus.
- ❖ New warts may appear several months after treatment, in the absence of new infection.
- ❖ If you receive the HPV vaccine before you start having sex, this can prevent you catching the virus and reduce the chance of you developing genital warts.
- ❖ Even if you have had genital warts before, you can still catch the virus again and develop new warts.

What are the symptoms of genital warts?

- ❖ The most common symptom in men and women is lumps anywhere in the genital area
- ❖ Genital warts appear as raised growths or bumps which can be single or multiple, small or large. Sometimes they are flat. They are usually flesh-coloured or whitish in appearance.
- ❖ Warts only rarely cause itching, burning, bleeding or pain.

Do I need any tests?

- ❖ If you think you have been in contact with genital warts, or other infections, or have symptoms that could be genital warts you should visit your family doctor or local sexual health or venereology/dermatology clinic for a check up.
- ❖ Sometimes warts can be hard to see. Also, it can be hard to tell the difference between a wart and normal bumps and lumps in the genital area. A doctor or nurse will check more closely and may use a magnifying lens to find smaller warts.
- ❖ If you have genital warts, you should also be tested for other sexually transmitted infections such as HIV, syphilis, chlamydia and gonorrhoea as you may have more than one infection at the same time.

Genital warts - Patient information leaflet

What is the treatment for genital warts?

- ❖ A healthy immune system is usually able to clear the virus, or suppress it, over time leading to long term cure of the warts.
- ❖ There are a number of different treatments available for genital warts. No one treatment is best.
- ❖ The goal of any treatment is to remove visible genital warts. None of the treatments clear the virus from your body. All treatments can sometimes cause local skin reactions including itching, burning, erosions, and pain.
- ❖ About 1/3 of genital warts return, whichever treatment you have.
- ❖ Avoid shaving your genital areas as this may spread the HPV virus in the area

Clinic treatment (These need to be done by a doctor or nurse but have the advantage of getting rid of warts more quickly)

- ❖ Cryotherapy (freezing with liquid nitrogen).
- ❖ Trichloroacetic acid is a chemical applied to the wart
- ❖ Electrosurgery / scissors excision / curettage / laser

Home treatment (none of these can be used if there is a chance that you are pregnant)

- ❖ Podophyllotoxin cream or solution. This is a self-applied treatment for external genital warts and must be used for about 6 weeks.
- ❖ Imiquimod cream. This is also a self-applied treatment for external genital warts. It may need to be used for up to 16 weeks.
- ❖ Sinecatechin cream. The ointment is applied three times daily. It may be used for up to 16 weeks.

Should I have sex if I have genital warts?

- ❖ It is sensible to have a check for other infections before having sex, and while you have warts it is recommended that you use condoms as this may speed up the time taken for the virus to clear.
- ❖ If you have sex with a new partner, condom use will reduce the risk of transmission, but not completely eliminate it.

What are the possible complications of genital warts?

- ❖ Genital warts do not lead to any long-term physical problems
- ❖ Genital warts do not affect fertility
- ❖ Some people may be anxious by the appearance of warts which can affect their sex life

Genital warts and pregnancy

- ❖ Because of hormone changes in the body, warts can grow in size and number during pregnancy. They nearly always get much smaller or disappear after the baby has been born
- ❖ Most children born to women with a history of genital warts are healthy.
- ❖ Very rarely, babies exposed to the wart-types of HPV during birth may develop wart growths in their throat or genital area. This is so unusual that people with genital warts do not need to have a Caesarean-section delivery unless warts are blocking the birth canal.

Do I need to tell my partner?

- ❖ If you do have genital warts, it is recommended that your current sexual partner is given general information about sexually transmitted infections and their prevention.

Further help and information

- ❖ If you suspect that you have genital warts or any other sexually transmitted infection, then see your family doctor or local sexual health or venereology/dermatology clinic.