

# Genital Warts

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## What are genital warts?

Genital warts are warts found on or around the genital area. Genital warts are also called condylomata.

Warts are caused by the virus called Human Papillomavirus or HPV. There are more than 100 different types of wart viruses. These viruses can cause the common warts found on your hands and feet. About one third of these viruses cause genital warts.

## How do you get genital warts?

As with any virus, HPV can be passed from one person to another by direct contact with the skin (as in vaginal, anal or oral intercourse, foreplay and using sex toys). The most common way to get genital warts is to have unprotected sex with someone who has the genital wart virus.

The warts may appear within weeks after contact or it may be months or years before they show up. In some cases they never appear. Because of this it is sometimes difficult to know where or when you may have come in contact with the virus. Genital warts are one of the most common sexually transmitted diseases. It may be possible to get genital warts through non-sexual contact, but this is very rare.

## Who is at risk for getting genital warts?

Anyone who is having sexual contact is at risk, especially if you do not use a condom. Genital warts are more common in people who have had more than one sexual partner. The more partners you have the greater the risk.

In some people the virus is present in the cells but cannot be seen. As a result some people do not know they have genital warts, this is called a latent infection. A medical problem that affects your immune system may cause the warts to come out of the latent stage and become obvious. Smoking weakens your immune system and may increase your risk.

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## What are the symptoms of genital warts?

The symptoms vary depending on where the warts are located. If they are inside your urethra, vagina or on your cervix you may not have symptoms.

If they are on the outside of your body around the vulva, penis, scrotum or anal area you may notice itching, burning, or feel irritation. For some people sexual intercourse becomes painful. You may notice more discharge than usual. Many people feel "bumps", but warts can look like normal skin. Genital warts in the anal area can be mistaken for hemorrhoids.

If you have any of these symptoms or have been in contact with someone who has genital warts, see your doctor.

## How are genital warts diagnosed?

If the warts are "bumps" on the skin, it is easier for your doctor to diagnose them just by looking at the area. If you have flat warts, the diagnosis may be more difficult. An examination with a special microscope called a colposcope is the best way to find all genital warts.

In some women signs of the virus may show up on a routine Pap smear. If this happens your doctor may send you to a specialist to have the cervix, vagina and vulva examined with a colposcope, or just repeat your Pap smear in 6 months.

In men the warts may be hard to find. They may be in the urethra or under the foreskin. A specialist, called a urologist, can do a more thorough examination to find where the warts are located. Not all warts are visible to the naked eye.

## How are genital warts treated?

Different types of genital warts are treated in different ways. The most common way is to put a chemical on the wart to help the body get rid of it. This chemical may need to be put on many times before the wart will go away. If the chemical does not work the wart may need to be removed with surgery.

Your own immune system can fight the wart virus. You can help your immune system by eating a well balanced diet, getting enough sleep and avoiding stress as much as possible. You can also help yourself by quitting smoking, as genital warts seem more resistant to treatment if you smoke.

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It takes a long time to treat warts but with treatment you should be able to get rid of the warts you can see. Treatment should also keep warts from getting worse. In some people, the warts may go away on their own. Even if your warts are not being treated, you need to see a doctor or a specialist for follow-up.

## **Can genital warts come back?**

Yes. The virus remains in your body even after the warts you can see are gone. The warts can appear very soon after treatment or can take years before they appear again. It is possible that they may never show again. The best defense against warts is a healthy immune system.

## **Can the genital wart virus cause cancer?**

The genital wart virus can cause cells to grow abnormally. With abnormal cell growth, there is a risk of cancer. There is evidence linking certain types of the wart virus to cervical dysplasia and cervical cancer in women.

Women may be more at risk to develop cancer of the cervix if they have genital warts and any other risk factors such as:

- smoking
- first intercourse at an early age
- more than one sexual partner
- the presence of other sexually transmitted diseases

Having regular Pap smears should find early warning signs before a cancer develops.

Although men are at much lower risk of developing cancers related to the wart virus they should be followed regularly by their doctor.

## **What if I am pregnant and have genital warts?**

Tell your doctor as soon as you think you may be pregnant. Some treatments should be avoided because they may harm your baby. You may notice the warts are worse while you are pregnant. They may start to go away after you have your baby. Talk to your doctor about how the warts will affect you, your delivery and your baby.

## **How do people feel about having genital warts?**

Most people are upset and scared when they find genital warts. They are embarrassed to go to the doctor or talk to anyone about the problem. Most people are shocked to hear they have genital warts.

People may also be very angry at their sexual partner and feel that he or she is responsible for them getting genital warts. This may not be the case as the wart virus can be in your body for years before the warts appear. It is also possible that the contact person was not aware that they had the wart virus.

Many people with genital warts have had the same sexual partner for years. In some cases, a person may not have had a sexual contact for years.

Many people feel frustrated and discouraged while they are being treated because the treatment is slow to work. In some cases it may take several months before the warts go away.

It is normal to feel all of these emotions. Talk to your doctor. Genital warts are a common condition and your doctor should be able to answer most of your questions.

## **How do I take care of myself and prevent spreading the virus?**

Once you are aware that you have the wart virus you should see your doctor for regular check ups. The most important thing for women is to have a regular Pap smear. The best way to help yourself is to get treatment and take good care of yourself.

To help prevent passing the virus on to other people, you should use a condom during sexual intercourse. This will offer your partner some protection, but you can still pass the virus on by direct skin contact.

If you have a sexual partner and have not been using condoms it is not necessary to start using them. Your partner has already been in contact with the virus and using a condom will not prevent warts at this stage.