

Genital Warts and the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

Genital warts are small lumps that may grow on the genitals in men or women. They are caused by viruses similar to those that cause warts on hands or feet. These viruses all belong to the family called human papilloma viruses (HPV). This large family has more than 100 different members, which prefer different types of skin. For example, warts that grow on hands or feet are unlikely to grow on genital skin.

About 30 types of HPV prefer the genital area and may infect the skin or lining of the vulva, vagina, cervix, anus, penis and occasionally the mouth. A few of these types can cause the lumps known as genital warts. Many other types never cause visible warts and can only be detected on a Pap smear, or by special microscope or laboratory tests.

How do you get genital warts?

The HPV virus is usually passed on during sexual activity. This may be through direct skin contact, or the virus may be carried in body fluids from the genital skin of one person to the genital skin of another. If the skin is broken it is more likely that an infection will start.

Once a person is infected with HPV, small lumps may appear on the skin after a few weeks. Sometimes the virus may just remain in the skin and be invisible (this is called sub-clinical infection). It is often impossible to tell how long someone may have had the virus, or when they first caught it.

HPV is common, and may be found in people of all ages. Genital HPV infection is most common among young people. One estimate is that up to 70% of all sexually active people aged 19 to 25 may have the virus at some time.

How do I know if I have genital warts?

Some people may have genital warts but not be aware of them. Others may see or feel small lumps on the skin. They can range in size from almost invisible to several centimetres wide and occur in many different shapes. They can be shaped like a (tiny) cauliflower, like a pimple, be on a short stalk or lie flat. Warts often occur in several groups at a time. Most people do not feel any pain or discomfort. Others may feel some irritation or itching. Genital warts sometimes get in the way during sex.

It can be difficult to tell if a lump on the skin of your own genitals is a wart, so it is a good idea to get it checked. Your doctor or nurse can usually tell if they are warts just by looking.

Often, the first time a woman is aware of having HPV infection is when it shows up on a Pap smear. Genital warts may also appear for the first time, or grow larger, during pregnancy because of the effects of hormones.

Are they serious?

HPV infections are common and are usually regarded as a nuisance rather than a serious condition.

However, in some women with genital warts, the virus may be found on the cervix. If HPV is found on the cervix, there is a greater chance that precancerous cells may develop on the cervix. It is important that all women with genital warts have a Pap smear done regularly. If a Pap smear shows HPV, a repeat smear will be recommended within 6 to 12 months. If these repeat smears also show HPV, your doctor may recommend colposcopy.

Precancerous changes can also occur on the skin of the vagina and vulva, and more rarely on the penis. Smoking increases the risk of developing precancerous changes.

Can they be treated?

If the warts bother you, you can seek treatment. There are many different types of treatment available, including chemical paints and creams, freezing, burning (cautery), or laser. Often the treatment needs to be repeated several times before the lumps disappear. Some types of chemical paints (podophyllin or podophyllotoxin) are not recommended during pregnancy.

Unfortunately there is no method of treatment that will completely cure HPV infection. After having the warts treated there may still be some virus left in the skin and there is a chance that warts may recur.

Your own body's immune system can cure HPV infection altogether, although this may take months or years. Sometimes your body may keep the virus suppressed in the skin. In this case it is possible that the virus may become active again sometime in the future, eg if you become ill or run down.

It is important that you keep healthy to help your body fight these viruses. Eat a diet rich in fruits, vegetables and grains; get enough sleep and exercise; and look at ways of dealing with stress in your daily life.

Smoking cigarettes is believed to stop your body from effectively fighting infections, so quitting is a good idea.

Can I pass them on to my partner?

Yes, it is possible to pass the virus on just by skin to skin contact. So the use of condoms will give some protection.

If you have been with your partner for a while, and have been having unprotected sex, then it is likely that both of you already have the same virus.

If you have, or have had, genital warts, you may be concerned about passing the virus on to a new partner. This is possible while the virus remains in the skin. Unfortunately we do not know how long this might be. Using condoms will reduce the risk of passing on genital warts, as well as reducing your risk of catching another STI. It may be difficult, but it is a good idea to talk to your partner about having had genital warts.

How can I avoid getting genital warts?

Remember that many people carry the virus but it is invisible. You can catch these viruses from a person whose skin looks perfectly healthy.

The more people you have sex with, the more likely you are to come into contact with someone who has genital warts or other STIs. Using condoms will reduce your risk of getting genital warts, but condoms do not cover all the areas of skin that may be involved with HPV infection.

Is there anything else I should know?

Many people are shocked, or experience other strong feelings, when they discover they have genital warts or HPV. If you are feeling distressed, it is important to talk to your doctor, nurse or a counsellor for further information and support.

Your doctor may advise you to be tested for other STIs. A woman will be offered a Pap smear test also, if she hasn't had one recently.

For more information

This pamphlet is designed to give an overview of the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) and genital warts. For more specific information, please contact FPWA.

Condoms reduce the risk of catching genital warts but it is important to remember that condoms only protect the area of the skin they cover.

Practising safe sex reduces the risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

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For further information on sexual health visit the family planning website:
<http://www.fpwa-health.org.au>

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