

Genital Warts and the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

Genital warts are small lumps that may grow on the genitals of men and 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 are transmitted through sexual activity and can infect the skin or lining of the vulva, vagina, cervix (neck of the womb), 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.

HPV is very common, especially among young men and women. Most sexually active people will be exposed to the virus at some point in their lives, but many will never know they have it.

How do you get genital warts?

Genital warts are very contagious. Transmission occurs during unprotected vaginal, anal or (rarely) oral sexual activity through skin to skin genital contact.

How do I know if I have genital warts?

Genital warts are the most easily recognisable sign of a genital HPV infection. Many people, however, have a genital HPV infection without getting genital warts.

Once a person is infected, small lumps may appear on the skin after a few weeks or months. Warts 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 groups of several at a time. Most people do not feel any pain or discomfort while others may feel some irritation or itching. 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. A clinician can usually tell if it is a wart just by looking.

Sometimes HPV can 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.

Often, the first time a woman is aware of having a HPV infection is when it shows up on a Pap smear. There is no test for men who don't have visible warts. Genital warts may also appear for the first time, or grow larger, during pregnancy because of the effects of hormones.

Are they serious?

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

However, in some women the virus may be found on the cervix (it is possible to have the virus on the cervix without having visible warts). If HPV infects the cervix, there is a chance that precancerous cells may develop. It is important that all women, with or without visible warts, have regular Pap smears. If a Pap smear shows HPV, a repeat smear will be recommended within 12 months. If repeat smears also show HPV, your doctor may recommend a colposcopy (examination of the cervix with magnification).

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.

A free cervical cancer vaccine is available for young women – talk to a doctor or FFWA clinician for more details.

Can genital warts be treated?

Unfortunately there is no way of completely curing the HPV infection, but if the warts bother you, you can have them treated (sometimes they will go away by themselves). 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 treatment (podophyllotoxin and imiquimod) are not recommended during pregnancy.

After having the warts treated there may still be some of the virus left in the skin. If this happens there is a chance that the virus will become active again sometime in the future and warts may reoccur. This may happen 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.

In most cases the body gets rid of the infection on its own, without any help.

How can I avoid getting genital warts or passing them onto my partner?

Genital warts are very easily transmitted. Using condoms and dams (a thin latex square held over the vaginal or anal area during oral sex) provides some protection, but they only protect the area of skin they cover. Remember many people carry HPV but it is invisible, and you can catch it 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 sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

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 it is impossible to tell how long this will be for.

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.

Consider avoiding sex, especially with a new partner, when you have visible warts, as this is when you are most infectious.

It may be difficult, but it is a good idea to talk to your partner about genital warts.

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

For more information about genital warts or HPV contact the Sexual Health Helpline on 9227 6178 or 1800 198 205 (country callers) or email sexhelp@fpwa.org.au

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



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