

Genital Warts and HPV Infection

What are genital warts?

Genital warts are soft, fleshy, small growths on the skin. They are similar to common warts but are usually found around or in the vagina, cervix (the lower part of the uterus), penis, scrotum, anus, or the area between the vagina and anus.

What is the cause?

Genital warts are caused by infection with human papillomavirus (HPV). There are many types of HPV, including types that infect the genital area and some that cause genital warts.

HPV genital infection is a common sexually transmitted disease. It is spread by skin-to-skin contact. Genital warts are more contagious and easily spread than other warts. They may spread to other nearby parts of the body and they may be passed from person to person by sexual activity.

Some types of HPV infection can cause changes in a woman's cervix. Most of the time these changes are harmless and will get better on their own. However, if the infection is not treated, sometimes the changes may cause cancer of the cervix, vagina, or vulva.

What are the symptoms?

The warts usually first appear 1 to 6 months after contact with an infected person. However, you can be infected with HPV without having any visible warts. Genital warts look like small, flesh-colored, grayish white or pinkish white growths. You may have many warts or just 1 wart. The warts usually appear as thin, flexible, solid bumps on the skin that look like small pieces of cauliflower. They may grow and form larger cauliflower-like clusters of warts. Some warts, however, are quite small and flat and may not be easily noticed.

In women, warts can grow in the vulva (the folds of skin around the opening of the vagina), on the cervix, inside the vagina or urethra, or around the anus. In men, warts can grow on the tip or shaft of the penis and sometimes on the scrotum, in the urethra (the tube that carries urine out of the body), or around the anus.

You may have no symptoms or you may have:

- A bad smell, mild irritation, burning, itching, or pain in the vulva or vagina
- Pain when you have sex
- More vaginal discharge than usual
- Bleeding (from injury to warts during sex)

How are they diagnosed?

Warts may be found when women have a pelvic exam. Your provider may put a liquid on the skin to make it easier to see warts. He or she may use a magnifying instrument, or scope, to look closely at your genitals. Your provider may do a biopsy, removing a sample of tissue for lab tests.

Often HPV is discovered when a woman has a pelvic exam and Pap test.

Sometimes an HPV-DNA test may be done to see if the type of HPV causing the warts is the type that may cause cancer.

How are they treated?

There are several ways to treat HPV. Your healthcare provider will discuss your treatment choices with you. Usually the treatment is done in the provider's office. Your healthcare provider may:

- Put medicine on the warts
- Surgically remove the warts
- Freeze the warts with liquid nitrogen (cryotherapy)
- Destroy the warts with a laser

You may need a local anesthetic to numb the area before some of these treatments.

In some cases your provider may recommend waiting to see if the warts go away on their own.

If you have genital warts and plan to get pregnant, get treatment for the warts before you get pregnant. If you get genital warts while you are pregnant, it is rare for the HPV to affect the baby. However, warts tend to grow and you may get more of them during the pregnancy. If warts are found during pregnancy, they are usually treated after the baby is born. You may need to have a C-section if your healthcare provider thinks that the warts are so big that they might make it hard to deliver the baby, or might tear and cause too much bleeding. It is rare for the baby to get warts after the delivery.

Removal of the warts does not get rid of the virus. You may get more warts after treatment. Because some types of HPV can cause precancerous or cancerous changes in the cervix, it is important for women who have had HPV infection to have regular Pap tests to check for abnormal cells. Cervical cancer is highly preventable with regular Pap tests and follow-up.

How can I take care of myself?

- Keep your genital area clean and dry. You can use a hair dryer to help dry the area.
- Wash your hands thoroughly after touching the area where you have warts.
- Don't scratch the warts.
- Follow your healthcare provider's instructions. Ask your provider:

- How and when you will hear your test results
- How long it will take to recover
- What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them
- Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.
- Women should have a Pap test as often as their healthcare provider recommends.
- If you have genital warts and plan to get pregnant, have your warts checked by your provider.

How can I help prevent the spread of genital warts?

Because HPV is the most important risk factor for cervical cancer, you should do what you can to prevent HPV infection and get treatment if you think you have an infection.

The best way to prevent the spread of HPV is by not having sex.

A vaccine is available to prevent types of HPV infection that are high risk for genital warts and cancer of the cervix. If you already have HPV, the vaccine will not cure your infection, but it will prevent infections with several other types of HPV.

The HPV vaccine is approved for females and males 9 to 26 years old. It is recommended for all girls and boys 11 to 12 years old as part of their routine immunization schedule. The vaccine may protect against HPV for 5 years. Researchers are doing studies to see if a booster shot is needed after 5 years. The HPV vaccine is usually not given to pregnant women.

Here are some other things you can do to help prevent HPV or its complications:

- Women: Get an exam and Pap test every year.
- Don't have sex until you are over the age of 18 or married.
- Use latex or polyurethane condoms during sex. Even after your warts are gone, you can infect your partner because the virus is still in your body. Condoms can lower the risk of getting genital warts from another person, but HPV can spread from areas not covered by a condom.
- Have sex with only 1 person who is not having sex with anyone else.
- Avoid sexual contact until the genital warts or HPV is completely treated and healed.
- Don't smoke. Studies show that smoking increases the risks and problems related to HPV infection.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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