

# Warts

## What are warts?

Warts are small growths or bumps on the skin caused by a virus. Warts are most common in children and young adults, but older adults can have them also. They can grow on all parts of the body. They are commonly seen on the face, hands, feet, genitals, or rectal area.

## What is the cause?

The virus that causes warts is called the human papillomavirus, or HPV. There are over 100 types of HPV viruses.

Warts can spread to other parts of your body. They may be passed to another person when that person touches the warts. Warts on the genital area can be spread to another person during sex. You can also get warts from objects that were used by someone who has warts, such as a razor. Some people get warts more easily than other people.

It may take up to 3 months from the time you are infected with the virus until a wart appears on your skin.

## What are the symptoms?

Warts are usually skin-colored, but may be gray or brown and feel rough when you touch them. They often cause a painless bump on the skin.

There are different kinds of warts.

- Common warts appear as bumps on fingers, near or under nails, and on the backs of the hands. You may have them around the nails and cuticles, especially if you bite your nails or pick at hangnails.
- Warts on the soles of the feet are called plantar warts. They may grow directly into the sole of the foot or they may stick out from the surface of the foot.
- Flat warts grow on many parts of the body. In children they are most common on the face. In adults they are often found in the bearded area of men's faces and on women's legs. Irritation from shaving may be the reason for this. They tend to be smaller and smoother than other warts and grow in clusters of 20 to 100.
- Genital warts occur on the vagina, penis, and scrotum, and in the area around the anus. Sometimes you may not be able to see genital warts, and usually they do not cause any symptoms. Sometimes they may cause pain, itching, or burning. Genital warts can be spread to the throat and vocal cords through oral-genital sex.

## **How are they diagnosed?**

Your healthcare provider will examine your skin and the wart. Most warts are diagnosed by how they look. Some tests, such as a Pap test in women, can help find genital infection caused by certain strains of HPV, some of which can cause cancer of the cervix (the opening of the uterus).

## **How are they treated?**

Your healthcare provider may use a number of treatments to remove warts. Warts can be frozen, burned, surgically removed, treated with chemicals or drugs, or removed with a laser. Some warts can be hard to get rid of completely. More than 1 treatment may be needed.

You can buy nonprescription products to treat most warts that are not genital warts. These products contain mild acids that you put on the wart twice a day for several weeks. Gradually, the dead skin of the wart will peel off. Use caution because these acids can irritate normal skin. Do not use these products if you are pregnant unless your provider says it is OK.

Another treatment for warts on the skin (nongenital warts) uses duct tape: Cover the wart with duct tape. Once a week, remove the tape and soak the wart in water. Gently rub the wart with an emery board, sandpaper, or pumice stone. (Don't then use these items anywhere else on your body. They could spread the wart virus to other parts of your body.) Put duct tape back on the wart about 12 hours later. Repeat this process until the wart is gone. It may take up to 2 months.

Genital warts can be sexually transmitted. They can be a more serious problem than warts on the skin. They need to be checked by your healthcare provider. Some genital warts inside the vagina and on the cervix can become cancerous. Women can have these cancer-causing warts on the cervix without having any warts that can be seen on the outside. Usually they don't cause any symptoms. This is why it's important for women to get Pap tests regularly. Cancers caused by these warts can be prevented with the HPV vaccine or with prompt diagnosis before the cells change to cancer. If you think you may have genital warts, see your healthcare provider. If you do have genital warts, your sexual partner may also need to be checked. Men can have genital warts inside the opening of the penis (urethra) and not know it. Avoid sexual contact until you and your partner have been treated. And always protect yourself with condoms, although sometimes the warts are beyond the area protected by the condom.

If nongenital warts do not interfere with walking or running or do not cause social problems or embarrassment, it may be best to leave them alone. In most cases your immune system will slowly get rid of the infection, but it may take a while (weeks or months, even a couple years).

## How long will the effects last?

Warts that are not genital are usually not serious and may go away on their own in up to 2 to 3 years. Some warts last a lifetime.

Genital warts can be more serious. Some can be related to the development of cervical cancer. Prompt treatment can prevent cervical cancer. Genital warts need to be treated by your healthcare provider.

Treatment of warts can remove the warts, but it may not get rid of the virus. Because of this, warts may come back.

Rarely, cancers on the penis and cancer of the throat can also be caused by HPV.

## How can I help prevent warts?

To help prevent spreading warts:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 15 seconds, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Don't let your wart touch other parts of your body or other people.
- Avoid brushing, clipping, combing, or shaving over areas with warts.
- Always wear shoes or sandals in public areas, such as pools and locker rooms
- Use a different nail file or clipper for nails that have warts near them.
- Don't bite your fingernails.
- Don't pick at warts. Consider covering them with bandages to discourage picking.
- Don't share toiletry or other personal items such as razors with other people.
- Use latex or polyurethane condoms to protect as much of the genital area as possible during sex. However, because condoms do not cover all of the skin, also protect yourself by having only one sexual partner and by knowing your partner's health history.

Girls, boys, and young women and men can get shots of a vaccine to prevent infection with some of the HPV strains that cause cervical cancer and genital warts. Ask your healthcare provider if the vaccine is recommended for you.

For more information about warts, call the American Academy of Dermatology at 888-462-3376 or visit their Web site at <http://www.aad.org>.

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