

What You Should Know About Genital Warts

What are genital warts?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is an infection that causes genital warts. In men, warts may grow on the penis, near the anus or between the penis and scrotum. In women, warts may grow on the vulva and perineal area, in the vagina and on the cervix. In some cases, HPV is the reason a Pap smear is abnormal.

The warts may be small, flat, flesh-colored bumps, or tiny, cauliflower-like bumps. The warts vary in size and may even be so small that you can't see them. In women, they can lead to cancer of the cervix. In men, they can lead to cancer of the penis.

How do you get HPV?

HPV is a sexually transmitted disease. The most common way to get HPV is by having sex with someone who has HPV. The only way to make sure you don't get it is to avoid having sex at all, or to have sex only with someone who doesn't have HPV and is only having sex with you.

Just because you can't see warts on your partner doesn't mean your partner doesn't have HPV. The infection can have a long incubation period, meaning months can pass between the time a person is infected with the virus and the time a person notices warts in the genital area. Sometimes, the warts can take years to develop. And, in women, the warts may be where you can't see them—inside the body, on the surface of the cervix.

Using condoms may prevent you from catching HPV from someone who might have it. However, condoms can't always cover all of the affected skin.

How are the warts diagnosed?

If you notice warts in your genital area, see your doctor. Your doctor may be able to diagnose the warts just by examining you. If the warts are small, your doctor may put a vinegar-like liquid on the skin around the warts and then use a magnifying glass to look for warts. The liquid makes the warts turn white, so they show up better.

Can genital warts be treated?

The warts can be removed, but the viral infection itself can't be cured. The virus goes on living inside your skin. This is why the warts often return after they have been removed, and you may need to have them removed again.

How are genital warts removed?

One way to remove the warts is to freeze them. This is called cryotherapy. The warts can also be taken off with a laser.

A new treatment, called the loop electrosurgical excision procedure (LEEP), can be used to remove the warts. With this method of removal, a sharp instrument, shaped like a loop, is passed underneath the wart and the wart is cut out of the skin.

Special chemicals can be used to remove the warts. These chemicals dissolve warts in the genital area. They may have to be applied to the area a number of times over a period of several weeks before the treatment is complete.

Chemicals you can buy at the store to remove warts from your hands shouldn't be used for this purpose. They can make your genital skin very sore.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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