

Warts and Verrucas

Warts are usually harmless but may be unsightly. Some warts on the feet (verruccas) are painful. Warts usually clear in time without treatment. If required, they can usually be cleared more quickly by applying acid, or by freezing with liquid nitrogen.

What are warts and verrucas?

- **Common warts** are small rough lumps on the skin. They are caused by a virus (papilloma virus) which causes a reaction in the skin. Warts can occur anywhere on the body but occur most commonly on hands and feet.
- **Verrucas** are warts on the soles of the feet. They are the same as warts on the hands and other parts of the body, but may look flatter and broader as they tend to get 'trodden in'.

Sometimes only one or two warts develop. Sometimes clusters of warts occur in the same area of skin. Most people develop warts at some time in their life, usually in childhood. About 1 in 10 people in the UK have warts at any one time. (Anal and genital warts are different and are dealt with in a separate leaflet.)

Are warts harmful?

Not usually. Sometimes verrucas are painful if they press on a sensitive part of the foot. Some people find their warts unsightly. Warts at the end of fingers may interfere with fine tasks. The wart virus is contagious (can be passed on). So, verrucas may be passed on in communal changing rooms where many bare feet tread on the same ground.

To treat or not to treat?

Not treating is an option. Most warts go without treatment and leave no scar. You have about a 3 in 10 chance that your warts will go within six months, and about a 5 in 10 chance they will go within a year. In some cases it takes up to two years or more for warts to go. Warts are not usually harmful. Parents often want treatment for their children. But, children are often not bothered by warts. Simply waiting for them to go is often the best thing to do.

If required, treatment can usually clear warts more quickly. But, treatments are time consuming

and may be painful.

What are the treatment options?

Acid treatments

There are various acid lotions, paints, and special plasters. They usually contain salicylic acid. You can buy these at pharmacies or your doctor may prescribe one. Ask your pharmacist for advice on how to use any particular brand. Usually, you need to apply the acid each day for up to 3 months. This 'burns' off the top layer. About once a week, rub off the dead tissue from the top of the wart with emery paper. Gradually the wart is 'burnt off' and 'rubbed away'. If you put the acid on correctly each day you have about a 7-8 in 10 chance of clearing the warts within 3 months. If you have diabetes or poor circulation should not use acid treatment. Tips for success include:

- Take care not to get the acid on the surrounding skin which may burn. You can protect the nearby skin from the acid by putting some Vaseline on the normal skin, or putting on a plaster with a hole in it which just exposes the wart for treatment.
- If the surrounding skin does become sore, stop the treatment for a few days until it settles down. Then restart treatment again. There is also a small risk that you may get a skin allergy to the treatment. If this occurs, the surrounding skin becomes red and itchy.
- The acid treatment may work better if you put a plaster on the wart or verruca after applying the acid. This stops the acid from being rubbed off and keeps it in place.
- It may take 2 weeks before you notice any improvement. It usually takes up to 3 months of daily acid applications for warts to go completely. So, do persevere.
- If one type of acid has not worked after 3 months, a switch to a different type may succeed.
- Lotions and paints for warts are flammable. Keep them away from open fires and flames.

Freezing treatment

Freezing warts with liquid nitrogen is a popular treatment. Many GPs and practice nurses are skilled at this. Liquid nitrogen is sprayed on, or applied to, the wart. Liquid nitrogen is very cold and the freezing and thawing destroys the wart tissue. To clear the wart fully it usually needs 3-5 treatments, a week or so apart. The chance of clearing a wart with freezing treatment is about the same as acid treatment. However, it is quicker.

Freezing treatment can be painful. Sometimes a small blister develops for a day or so on the nearby skin after treatment. Also, there is a slight risk of damaging the nearby skin, nail, or underlying tissues such as tendons or nerves. It is therefore not suitable for younger children.

Other treatments

Various other methods are sometimes used to 'cauterize', 'freeze' or cut out warts and verrucas. This depends on the preference or skill of the local doctor or chiropodist. One of these may be advised if other treatments have failed. Some of these treatments are painful and are not suitable for children.

What about swimming?

It is far more important for children to become good swimmers than to be barred from swimming because they have a wart on a foot (verruca). Most doctors agree that a child with a verruca should go swimming as normal. However, some swimming pool attendants or schools have their own ideas and regulations. You can buy plastic verruca socks or waterproof plasters at pharmacies and from some swimming pools if they insist that a verruca is covered.