

Genital Warts

What are genital warts?

Genital warts are growths on the skin that are caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV). The bumps usually appear on and around the labia and opening to the vagina, but they can also develop inside a woman's vagina or on her cervix. A man can develop warts on and around the shaft of his penis and testicles.

What are the symptoms of genital warts?

Warts are rough, flesh-colored bumps. They don't usually hurt, but sometimes they can itch. Occasionally they can become uncomfortable or bleed with intercourse. Many times people have the human papilloma virus that causes the warts, but do not have any visible bumps.

How did I get genital warts?

Genital warts are caused by HPV. There are over 100 different strains of the HPV virus. 90% of genital warts are caused by strain 6 or strain 11. The virus is passed from one person to another by skin to skin contact. It is usually spread during vaginal and anal intercourse, but can also be transmitted by touching genitals and rarely during oral sex. Warts are caused by low risk HPV. A woman can also get high risk HPV that can cause abnormal cells on the cervix and abnormal pap tests.

How are genital warts treated?

Genital warts can be left untreated. They will often go away on their own when your body's immune system suppresses the virus, but it may take months or years. You may choose to have the warts treated, but keep in mind, they may come back. Most treatments will remove the warts, but treatments do not kill the HPV virus. You should not use any wart treatments sold in stores for genital warts.

Treatment options include:

- Chemical treatment – An acid is applied to the warts. Several treatments may be needed. The areas that were treated can burn, itch, and swell. It may cause mild scarring.
- Cryotherapy – The warts are frozen. Several treatments may be needed. The freezing can burn slightly. The warts may itch afterwards and will sometimes blister. Rarely does it cause scarring.
- Imiquimod (Aldara) – You apply a prescription strength cream at home. The cream triggers your immune system to suppress the virus. You apply it three times a week. It can take several months for the bumps to resolve with the cream. It can cause some burning and irritation at the application sites.

What can I do after the warts are treated?

- Keep the area clean and dry.
- Do not scratch or shave the infected area.
- Wash your hands after touching the treated area.
- Use cold compresses and over-the-counter pain relievers to help with discomfort.

How can I keep from spreading the virus to others?

Abstaining from sex is the only definite way to prevent transmission of HPV and genital warts. Using a condom every time can reduce the chance of spreading the virus. If you and your partner have been together for some time, you both most likely have the virus, and condom use is probably not necessary (if you are monogamous). You should be seen regularly by your health care provider to have a pap test and get checked for warts and other STD's.