

Genital Warts (Condylomata Acuminata)

What are genital warts?

Genital warts (condylomata acuminata) are warts that appear on the:

- Vulva (entire outer female genital area)
- Vagina
- scrotum (balls)
- Penis
- Anus

They are caused by infection with specific types of human papillomavirus (HPV), most commonly types 6 and 11. The HPV types that cause genital warts can also cause warts on the tongue, throat, or cervix (the part of the womb that sits inside the top of the vagina).

Warts may not be seen until months after you are first infected with HPV.

Although you are most likely to spread HPV when you have visible warts, you can have infection and spread HPV to partners both before warts are seen and after warts have gone away.

How does HPV spread?

The virus is spread by skin-to-skin contact. Using condoms reduces the risk of getting genital warts, but cannot completely prevent it because not all of the skin is covered.

- Internal (female) condoms cover more of the vulva or the skin around the anus than condoms placed over a penis or sex toy.
- Natural (lambskin) condoms do not protect against sexually transmitted infections including HPV.

- Vaccination with Gardasil or Gardasil 9 will protect you from getting genital warts, especially if you are vaccinated before starting sexual activity.

What are the symptoms?

- Warts usually first appear as a small bump on the skin that often grows larger.
- They usually are flesh-colored or whitish and can be smooth or bumpy.
- A single wart may be surrounded by smaller warts. Sometimes they grow to form a large cluster of warts that has the shape of a cauliflower.
- If you have a disease such as HIV or leukemia, or take medications that weaken your immune system, your warts can grow very large.
- Warts may cause itching and sometimes bleed after getting snagged and torn.
- They can be very bothersome but it is rare for them to cause a health problem that requires immediate treatment. They do not turn into cancer.

How is it diagnosed?

Usually, your health care provider can diagnose warts by the way they look. Sometimes, a weak acetic acid solution (vinegar) is applied to your skin. This turns warts white and makes them easier to see. If the abnormal growth looks like it could be something more worrisome than a wart, a small piece of skin (a biopsy) may be removed for laboratory diagnosis. You will get a shot of numbing medicine before the skin is removed.

How is it treated?

For about 1 out of 3 people who have them, genital warts will go away or get smaller in 4 months. You may choose to get immediate treatment or to wait and see if they go away without treatment. Even after treatment, genital warts can return. If you have a healthy immune system, your body will most likely get rid of the HPV infection that causes warts, but this may take a few years.

Treatment at home

- Imiquimod cream (Aldara)
 - It works by boosting your immune system to get rid of the HPV causing the wart(s).
 - Use a cotton swab to apply a small amount to the warts at bedtime and then keep the skin dry until you wash the following morning (6-10 hours after application). Do this 3 days per week (such as Monday-Wednesday-Friday) for up to 16 weeks.
 - It is normal for your skin to become inflamed (red, swollen, itching). It is a sign that the medicine is working. If the inflammation is severe, stop the medicine for a few days to allow some healing before you restart.
 - Do not use if pregnant.

Treatment in the clinic

All of these methods work by destroying wart tissue. They may may be used if you are pregnant.

- Trichloroacetic acid (TCA)
 - It works by destroying the wart tissue.
 - We will apply the TCA to your warts. We first put some petroleum jelly on the skin around the wart to protect it from getting burned by the TCA.
 - The TCA turns white when it is dry and you should stay still until it has dried.
 - It is applied in clinic once a week for up to 6 weeks.
- Freezing the warts (cryotherapy)
- Burning the warts with an electric current (electrocautery).

Other treatments

If these methods do not work, there are other options. Sometimes, especially if you have many or very large warts, surgical removal or laser therapy (destroying tissue with focused beams of light) is needed.

Resources

National HPV and Cervical Cancer Prevention Resource Center

Created by the American Sexual Health Association (ASHA)

<http://www.ashasexualhealth.org/stdsstis/hpv/>

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