

## What are genital warts?

Warts (bumps) that appear on the **vulva** (the outer female genital area), vagina, or anus are called **genital warts**. Other names for this condition include condyloma acuminata, low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesions of the vulva (LSIL), flat condyloma, or HPV effect.

Genital warts are caused by the **human papillomavirus (HPV)**, which is spread by skin-to-skin contact. There are many different types of HPV, which medical experts think are related to different types of health conditions.

- Genital warts are usually caused by HPV types 6 and 11. These 2 virus types are not the kinds that cause precancer or cancer.
- The HPV types that cause genital warts can also cause warts on the tongue, throat, or **cervix** (the part of the womb that connects to the vagina).
- You may not see any warts until months after you are first infected with HPV. Although you are most likely to spread HPV when you have warts you can see, you can also have the infection and spread HPV to sexual partners before the warts appear and after the warts have gone away.

## What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

- HPV is the most common **sexually transmitted infection (STI)**, or an infection that is spread through sexual contact) in the United States. As many as 8 out of 10 people will be infected with HPV at some point in their lifetime.

- Genital HPV infections can happen to anyone who has ever been sexually active or come in contact with genitals. There may be no signs or symptoms of infection, or you may not have any symptoms for a long time after infection, so it is hard to know where, or who, the infection came from.
- Many times, HPV is **transient** (which means it comes and goes) and it may show up on some testing, such as a cervical Pap test, but not on other testing. When the infection stays around for many years, health problems like genital warts, precancer, or cancer can arise.
- HPV can cause abnormal growth of tissue in the lower genital tract (which includes the cervix, vagina, vulva, and anus). There is also a chance of exposure and abnormal tissue growth in the throat.

Sometimes people get many different types, or **strains**, of HPV over time. Some strains can cause genital warts, and some can cause precancerous growths or cancer.

### **How do I prevent the spread of genital warts?**

- Using condoms or dental dams reduces the risk of getting genital warts, but they cannot completely prevent the risk because not all skin is covered.
  - Internal condoms (sometimes called female condoms) cover more of the vulva and the skin around the anus than the type of condoms placed over a penis or sex toy.
  - Lambskin condoms do not protect against HPV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- The Gardasil® or Gardasil® 9 vaccines (HPV vaccines) will protect you from getting genital warts, especially if you are vaccinated before starting sexual activity.

## What are the symptoms of genital warts?

- Warts usually first appear as a small bump on the skin that often grows larger. They are usually skin-colored or white, and they 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 are **immunocompromised** (you have a weakened immune system), your warts can grow very large.
- Warts may itch, and sometimes they may bleed after getting rubbed or torn. They can be very annoying, but it is rare for them to cause a health problem that requires immediate treatment. Warts do not turn into cancer.

## How are genital warts diagnosed?

- Usually, your healthcare provider can diagnose warts by the way they look. Sometimes, they may put a vinegar solution (called acetic acid) on your skin. This turns warts white and makes them easier to see.
- If you have an abnormal skin growth that looks like it could be something more serious than a wart, your provider may remove a small piece of skin (a **biopsy**) for laboratory testing. They will give you a shot of numbing medication before they remove the skin.

## How are genital warts treated?

- For about 1 in 3 people who have genital warts, the warts will go away or get smaller in 4 months. You may choose to get immediate treatment or to wait and see if the warts go away without treatment. 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.
- If you use tobacco products, we will encourage you to quit, as tobacco use can cause genital warts to grow or come back. Quitting is an

important step in HPV treatment. Here is a resource to help with stopping tobacco use:

[www.med.umich.edu/1libr/CCG/HowToQuitSmoking.pdf](http://www.med.umich.edu/1libr/CCG/HowToQuitSmoking.pdf)

### **Treatment at home**

Sometimes you can use **topical medication** (medication that you put on your skin as a cream or ointment), such as imiquimod cream (Aldara®), to treat genital warts. It works by boosting your immune system to kill off the skin cells of the wart.

- Use a cotton swab (Q-tip®) to put a very small amount of cream on the affected skin area at bedtime. Then keep the skin dry until you wash it the next morning (6-10 hours after you put the cream on). Do this 3 days a week (for example, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday) for up to 12 weeks.
- When using imiquimod, your skin may become inflamed (red, swollen, itchy, or form blisters). This is a sign that the medication is working. If the inflammation is bad, stop using the medicine for a few days to help it heal a little before you start using it again. You may use cotton gauze and wear white cotton underwear for comfort. Another side effect is that you may feel like you have flu-like symptoms, and the area where you apply the cream may lose skin color and become lighter in color permanently. Do not use imiquimoid (Aldara®) cream if you are pregnant.
- After you start this treatment, we will see you for a clinic visit in 4 months. We will recheck the area and make sure the medication has worked.

### **TCA treatment in the clinic**

You may choose to have your genital warts treated in our clinic with trichloroacetic acid (TCA). This works by destroying the wart tissue.

- We will apply the TCA to your warts. First, we usually 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.
- We may treat your warts with TCA once a week for up to 6 weeks.
- TCA is a safe treatment for people who are pregnant.

### **Laser ablation**



If you have many warts or very large warts, you may need laser therapy to remove them. We use focused beams of light to destroy the abnormal tissue (called **laser ablation**). Laser ablation is done in an operating room. We will give you medication to make you sleep during the procedure.

### **Surgical excision**

If you have many warts or very large warts, we may need to remove them through surgery (called **surgical excision**). We will remove the warts with **margins** (a small piece of surrounding healthy skin.) This is usually performed in an operating room. We will give you medication to make you sleep during the surgery.

- If you are having a large area of genital warts removed, we will talk with you about special ways to help your skin close and heal after surgery.

## Where can I find more information on genital warts and HPV?

Resource	QR code
National HPV and Cervical Cancer Prevention Resource Center (created by the American Sexual Health Association) <a href="http://www.ashasexualhealth.org/human_papilloma_virus">www.ashasexualhealth.org/human_papilloma_virus</a>	
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): Anogenital Warts <a href="http://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment-guidelines/anogenital-warts.htm">www.cdc.gov/std/treatment-guidelines/anogenital-warts.htm</a>	

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