



Genital Warts

What are genital warts?

Genital and anal warts are caused by a virus called human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is the most common sexually transmitted disease in the United States, causing more than 5 million new infections each year. There are nearly 100 different strains of HPV. Some strains have been associated with cancers of the cervix, anus, and genital skin. The strains that cause cancer are generally different than the strains that cause genital warts. Both men and women can get HPV.

What causes genital warts?

HPV, the virus that causes genital warts, is spread through direct contact with an infected person during vaginal, anal, (and perhaps oral) sex.

Many people infected with HPV have warts that are very small and hard to see, or they may have no warts at all. You can still pass HPV to your sex partners even if you have no visible warts.

What are the symptoms of HPV?

Most people infected with HPV do not have warts or other symptoms. If symptoms are experienced, they may include warts in the genital or anal areas, which appear as fleshy bumps. Warts may also be hidden on the cervix, in the vagina, or in the rectum. Warts usually appear 1 to 3 months after contact with an infected person, but may take up to a year to appear.

How will I know if I have HPV?

If you have genital warts, your doctor or other health-care provider can tell by examining the area visually. If you are infected with HPV but don't have warts, the diagnosis requires laboratory testing (such as a Pap test).

How are genital warts treated?

There is no single treatment that is best for all patients or all warts. Treatment depends partly on the size, number, and location of the warts. They can be removed from the skin with medicated creams and liquids, by freezing with liquid nitrogen, through surgery, or by laser treatment. Your provider will give you advice on the best treatment for you. Medications used to treat warts on the hands or feet should *not* be used to treat genital warts because they can be harmful to the genital skin. Warts may be more difficult to treat in persons with a weakened immune system, such as those with advanced HIV infection.

Although warts can be removed, there is no cure for HPV infection.

What happens if genital warts are left untreated?

Left untreated, genital warts can grow larger, bleed, and cause pain or itching. Rarely, genital warts result in cancer.

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Genital Warts, *Continued*

Do sex partners have to be treated?

If you're diagnosed with genital warts, it's important to tell everyone you've had sex with recently, so they can be evaluated for HPV and other STDs and treated appropriately. There is currently no widely available test to tell whether someone without visible warts or other symptoms is infected with HPV.

What if I'm pregnant?

During pregnancy, genital warts may grow more quickly, or return after previously having been removed. The risk of the baby becoming infected is very small, but you should tell your health-care provider that you're pregnant when you seek treatment for genital warts.

All pregnant women should be tested for other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, as early as possible in pregnancy. You should be tested again during your pregnancy if you are at higher risk for getting an STD. For example, you are at higher risk if you have a new sex partner during pregnancy, or if you have more than one partner. If left untreated, STDs can be devastating for your baby. To protect yourself and your baby against STDs, use a latex condom whenever you have sex.

How can I avoid genital warts?

We do not know exactly how effective latex condoms are in preventing the spread of HPV.

Sexually transmitted infections, including HPV, can be avoided by not having sex. *If you are sexually active*, you can reduce your risk of getting HPV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, by having sex only in a mutually monogamous relationship with a partner you are sure is not infected. If you are having sex outside of such a relationship, you can reduce your risk of STDs by:

- 1) *Always using a latex condom (or other type of latex barrier) whenever you have sex – vaginal, anal, or oral.* Condoms made of "natural" materials, such as lambskin, protect against pregnancy, but not against STDs. If you are allergic to latex, you can use condoms made of polyurethane or other synthetic materials.
- 2) *Limiting the number of people you have sex with.*
The more partners you have, the higher your risk.
- 3) *Avoiding alcohol and drugs when you have sex.* Drinking or getting high makes it much harder to remember to use condoms to protect yourself and others. For free, confidential help with a substance abuse problem, call 1-800-LIFENET (1-800-543-3638) or just call 311.

More information

Free, confidential STD exams and treatment, and confidential or anonymous HIV counseling and testing, are available at Health Department clinics in all 5 boroughs of New York City. Health insurance, proof of citizenship, and parental consent are NOT required. For a list of clinics and hours, visit nyc.gov/health, or call 311.

