

What do you know about...

Chlamydia

Vaginal health

Genital herpes

Gonorrhoea

Genital warts

Your guide to
sexual health and
wellbeing

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Your guide to sexual health and wellbeing

Genital warts: your questions answered

Q. What are genital warts?

A. Genital warts are skin growths caused by a virus known as the human papilloma virus (HPV). There are lots of different types of HPV. Some types cause warts on your hands and some can cause verrucas on your feet. They are usually different from those that cause warts on your genitals. HPV is very common and the lifetime risk of getting this infection is up to 80%, with only 1% of affected individuals having symptoms of warts.

There are many forms of HPV, some of which can cause cervical cancer. Genital warts are **not** caused by the same type as those that can cause cervical cancer. Having genital warts does not mean that you have cervical cancer, but women aged 25-64 should go for cervical smears every time they are invited.

Q. What are the symptoms of genital warts?

A. Genital warts are skin growths - you may notice small, pinkish/white cauliflower-like lumps or warts appearing singly or in groups, around or inside the genital area. It can take weeks, months or sometimes longer after coming into contact with the virus before genital warts appear.

The warts may be itchy but are painless, although they may bleed if scratched. You might see or feel them yourself or they may be noticed by your partner, or during a medical examination. Not everyone who has the HPV virus will develop actual warts - people can carry HPV in their skin without having visible warts.

Q. How can I catch genital warts?

A. The virus is spread through skin-to-skin contact. It can be passed from one person to another during sex or close genital contact, or by sharing sex toys. It lives in the genital skin but does not spread throughout your body. HPV can be present in the skin without any warts being visible and therefore could be passed on to a sexual partner. This makes it hard to know exactly when you got the virus or who you got it from.

Q. Do I need any tests?

A. If you or your partner are worried that you may have genital warts, you should see a doctor. You can visit your local GP surgery, or a sexual health service. These are specialist services that deal with sexually transmitted infections, are confidential, and you can go to without having to see your GP first.

There isn't a test for genital warts other than what can be seen when you are examined. If everything in your genital area

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looks and feels normal to you, then you do not have genital warts. However, you could still carry the virus that causes them.

If you have genital warts or have been at risk of infection you should be tested for other sexually transmitted infections such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea, HIV and syphilis. Women should have regular cervical screening (smear tests). However, you do not need to have more frequent tests just because you have had genital warts.

Q. If I have genital warts, what happens next?

A. If left untreated, genital warts may disappear on their own. However, they may also stay the same size, or grow larger in size and number. There are several different treatments available for genital warts. None of the treatments clears the virus from the body. Treatment may involve a prescribed cream or liquid that you use at home. Other treatments include freezing, which is carried out by a doctor or nurse in the clinic. All treatments may be uncomfortable and may go on for several weeks to ensure the complete removal of the warts. Most people require treatment for at least four weeks but it may take longer. New warts may reappear following treatment due to the persistence of HPV in the skin. Stopping smoking can improve the clearance of warts.

Do not use wart-removal preparations that you can buy from the pharmacy, as these are not suitable for genital skin - always consult a doctor or nurse.

Q. Are genital warts dangerous during pregnancy?

A. In some women, genital warts can appear for the first time or become larger or increase in number during pregnancy. Often, within six weeks of the delivery of the baby, the warts will become smaller again and usually disappear.

Some treatments are unsuitable during pregnancy and treatment may be delayed until after the child is born. If you are pregnant, or trying to get pregnant, tell the doctor so they can choose a treatment that won't be harmful to the developing baby.

The risk of passing the virus to your baby, either during pregnancy or delivery, is very small.

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Q. How do I tell my partner that I have genital warts?

A. Some people can feel upset, angry, frightened or embarrassed about discussing sexually transmitted infections with their current or former partner(s). Your partner will only know that they have HPV if there are visible warts.

The doctor or nurse will talk to you about who you may need to tell and how you can do it.

Q. How can I best prevent infection?

A. HPV can't pass through a condom, so always use one to reduce the spread of the virus. However, if HPV is present on the genital skin or in areas not protected by a condom, transmission may still occur. If there are visible warts not covered by a condom, it is best to avoid sex until the warts have cleared up.

The best way to prevent all sexually transmitted infections, including genital warts, as well as to protect against HIV and HPV, is to practise **safer sex**. This means using a condom for vaginal, oral and anal sex.

Safer sex

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) can pass from one person to another through unprotected sex and sharing sex toys. You don't need to have lots of sexual partners to get an STI. However, you are more likely to have an STI if you have had a recent change in sexual partner or if you have had more than two sexual partners in the last 12 months.

Safer sex involves using condoms and dental dams for oral sex, condoms for vaginal sex and condoms with water-based lube for anal sex. This helps prevent infections being passed on to your partner.

Condoms are available free from sexual health services and young people's drop-in services. They are also for sale at most pharmacies and supermarkets. Always use a quality condom that displays the European CE Kitemark.

**For more information, visit
www.sexualhealthscotland.co.uk or
call NHS Inform free on
0800 22 44 88 (textphone 18001
0800 22 44 88).**

The helpline is open every day 8am to 10pm and also provides an interpreting service.