

## Department of Genitourinary Medicine

# Patient Information



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# Information

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## Genital Warts

Genital warts are very common—around 70,000 cases are seen each year in sexual health clinics in England.

They are due to infection with the wart virus, also called the human papillomavirus or HPV. This virus is also responsible for common warts (such as those found on the hands) but there are over 100 types of HPV.

### How do you get genital warts?

- The wart virus is transmitted by skin to skin contact, and can therefore be passed on through any close sexual contact.
- It is estimated that 3 out of 4 men and women will have been infected with the virus by the age of 50; however *most people who are infected with the wart virus do not have any obvious warts*. This is called subclinical (meaning silent) infection.
- Because of this, and the long incubation of the infection (it can be many months or years between being infected and the warts appearing), it is often difficult to identify where the infection came from.
- Men or women who have had many sexual partners, or a recent change of partner, are at risk of developing a sexually transmitted infection (STI); however genital warts are common in longstanding monogamous relationships, and are *not* evidence of infidelity.

### How are genital warts diagnosed?

- Genital warts vary in appearance, from small flat bumps to large, pink, cauliflower-like lumps. They may be single or multiple, and usually feel rough to touch.
- An experienced doctor or nurse will usually be able to diagnose genital warts just by their appearance.
- Sometimes wart virus infection can be picked up on a cervical smear.
- Other than this, in people without obvious warts, there is no way of telling whether or not they have the virus.

- A negative routine sexual health screen does not exclude infection with the wart virus.

## How are genital warts treated?

Various methods of treatment may be used, depending on the number, type and size of the warts. Most of these work by destroying the infected cells. The treatments may be uncomfortable, but are not usually painful.

- Paints or creams, which may be applied in the clinic or at home.
- The warts may be frozen or burnt off.
- It is possible for the warts to disappear on their own, and some people choose not to have treatment.
- Wart treatments sold at the pharmacy should not be used in the genital area.
- Warts can be stubborn, and treatment may take several weeks.

## Will the warts come back?

Sometimes the wart virus can persist in the skin following treatment, but most infections clear completely within 6-12 months.

Smoking has a very powerful effect on the immune system's ability to deal with wart virus infection. This means that the infection may take longer to clear in smokers.

If the warts have not recurred within 6 months after treatment, they are unlikely to do so.

It is possible to be re-infected with the wart virus, as being infected with one type does not give you immunity against the others.

In a long-term relationship, it is highly likely that both of you have the virus, and there is no evidence that using condoms will prevent re-infection.

If you are in a new relationship or have a new sexual partner, you are advised to use condoms while you are being treated for the warts.

## How serious are genital warts?

Most cases of cervical cancer are due to the HPV types 16 and 18. The types of HPV which cause visible genital warts (usually 6 and 11) do not cause cervical or other genital cancers. Women with genital warts are not at increased risk of cervical cancer and do *not* need to have any additional cervical smears.

Genital warts do not affect your fertility.

Genital warts may be difficult to treat during pregnancy, but often disappear a few months after delivery. It is very rare for the virus to be passed on to the baby.

## How can genital warts be prevented?

The virus is transmitted by skin contact, and can therefore be passed on through any close sexual contact.

Condoms will provide some, but not complete, protection against infection. The virus cannot pass through a condom, but as condoms do not cover all the genital area it is possible to infect genital skin that is not covered by a condom.

Two vaccines have been developed which can protect against the HPV types that are the commonest cause of cervical cancer (types 16 and 18).

A programme to immunise girls from the age of 11 years started in the UK in 2008. In 2012, the vaccine was changed to Gardasil, which also protects against the HPV types 6 and 11 that cause genital warts, and it is hoped that this will significantly reduce cases of genital warts as well as cervical cancer.

## Where can I get more information?

NHS choices: [http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Genital\\_warts/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Genital_warts/Pages/Introduction.aspx)

Department of Genitourinary Medicine  
The Park Centre for Sexual Health

To book an appointment, please call: (01305) 762 682