

GENITAL WARTS

Patient Information Fact Sheet

›What are genital warts?

Genital warts are caused by a virus called the human papilloma virus (HPV). This virus can cause warts in different areas of the body. In women, genital warts occur on the vulva, cervix, in the vagina, and around the anus; in men they occur on the penis, in the urethra (the tube that connects the bladder to the penis), and around the anus. It can take from two weeks to a year from infection with the virus for the warts to actually develop. Genital warts are most common in young people aged between 16 and 24 years. Genital warts are classified as a sexually transmitted infection (STI), as they can be passed on via sexual contact. Other sexually transmitted infections such as gonorrhea and chlamydia are often present at the same time as warts.

›What are the symptoms of genital warts?

Genital warts are usually painless but may cause itching. They can occur singly or in clusters and may appear as small bumps that are almost unnoticeable, or as larger, raised cauliflower-like lumps.

›How are genital warts treated?

The best treatments available for genital warts are topical (eg, external lotions or solutions) but these are not always effective. The most commonly used treatment is a liquid containing **podofilox** (Condylox). If the warts are external, the liquid may be painted on regularly; this may be done at a clinic or it is sometimes given to use at home. Careful instruction is required before attempting this.

Another locally applied treatment that may be used is **imiquimod** (Aldara) cream. This is a type of medicine known as an **immunomodulator**. Guidelines also recommend using **sinecatechins** (Veregen) ointment. Preparations sold for over the counter use in pharmacies are for use on the hands and must never be used on genital warts. Only treatments prescribed by a medical practitioner should be used on genital warts. If the warts are not cleared by topical treatment, they may be removed by freezing (cryotherapy) or heating (cautery). Internal warts on the cervix may be treated by laser during a colposcopy (a procedure in which a special instrument is inserted into the vagina to allow examination of the tissues of the vagina and the cervix by means of a magnifying lens). This will be carried out under a local anesthetic. Regular cervical smears will then be advised as it has been found that women with the wart virus may be more likely to have changes to the cervix in the future. These changes could, in some cases, turn into cancer, but having warts does not mean that cancer will develop.

›Further information

CDC Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/std/treatment/2010/genital-warts.htm

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