

Genital warts

What are genital warts?

Condylomata acuminata (genital warts) refers to visible warts on a person's genitals and in the area around the anus. Genital warts are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), which is transmitted mainly during sexual contact. While this virus does not always cause visible warts, it can live in the genital area for a long period of time.

How do you catch genital warts?

The infection is passed on during sexual contact with someone carrying the virus, especially through intercourse. HPV cannot be transmitted through swimming pools, toilets or saunas.

Where do genital warts appear and what do they look like?

Genital warts can vary in appearance. They may develop on the labia, around the entry of the vagina, possibly inside the vagina or on the cervix. They may appear on the penis shaft, foreskin, glans and in the area around the anus. Occasionally, they develop in the opening of the urethra, in the pubic hair and on the scrotum. One or more warts may appear, and they may range from a millimetre to a centimetre in size. In some instances, several warts may lie close together and form clusters of varying sizes.

What about invisible genital warts?

It is common to have HPV in the genital area without any warts or symptoms. Eventually the body will clear the virus on its own.

Who might develop genital warts?

Genital warts can appear in sexually active persons of all ages.

How common is HPV?

It is a very common infection and, in most cases, those infected do not even develop visible warts. This means that most people don't know that they have, or have had, an HPV infection.

How long does it take to develop genital warts after infection?

Genital warts can appear one month after infection, at the earliest, although it might take months – or even years – before the first outbreak occurs. This explains how genital warts can occur in partners who are in steady relationships. In most cases, no visible genital warts appear at all.

How do I know if I have genital warts?

Unlike with HIV and chlamydia, for example, there is no routine test for diagnosing HPV. If you see genital warts you can ask a doctor to examine you. For women, it can be helpful to use a mirror, but genital warts inside vagina or cervix can only be diagnosed by means of a gynaecological examination. There is no need to check for genital warts unless you are experiencing symptoms.

How are genital warts treated?

There are no drugs that can cure or eradicate genital warts today. The purpose of treatment is to remove visible warts and thereby help a person's body to overcome the virus more quickly. In time, the body's immune system learns how to control HPV. Which treatment is chosen depends on what the warts look like and where they are located. As a first option, patients are offered an anti-wart cream or liquid to apply to the affected area. This is prescribed by a doctor. Other treatments include removing visible warts by freezing them, or by using a cauterizing pen under local anaesthesia.

What happens after treatment?

Genital warts can return despite treatment, although they often disappear after one or more treatments. It can take several months for the warts to completely disappear, and repeat treatments are sometimes needed.

Is there any link between genital warts and cancer?

There are several different types of HPV. The type that causes benign genital warts does not cause cancer.

However, certain other types of HPV can cause changes in the cells of the cervix. In rare cases, these cell changes can slowly develop into cancer, but this process takes many years. Cell changes can be treated and cured. For this reason, it is important for all women to undergo regular testing.

Can I have children?

Genital warts do not affect the ability to have children.

What if I'm pregnant?

Genital warts can not harm unborn babies, nor will they affect a mother's pregnancy. Genital warts can increase in size and number during pregnancy, but usually disappear on their own after the baby is born. In most cases, genital warts that occur during pregnancy do not need to be treated.