

Genital Warts

PATIENT INFORMATION

What are genital warts?

Genital warts are caused by human papilloma virus (HPV) infection. HPV is a group of viruses that cause warts on skin surfaces. Certain types of HPV cause warts on the hands and feet, while others can cause visible warts in the genital area or around the anus. The majority of people who are sexually active will carry genital HPV at some stage of their lifetime, but usually won't show any symptoms. There is an HPV vaccine available which is free of charge up to the age of 27

How does someone get genital warts?

- Genital warts and HPV are spread by skin-to-skin contact, usually during vaginal or anal sex, and usually by people who don't have symptoms and who do not know that they have the virus.
- While condoms are the best form of protection from most sexually transmitted infections, they don't offer full protection from HPV as condoms only cover the penis, not the rest of the genital skin.

How do I know if I have genital warts?

- Genital warts look like warts that appear on other body parts, except they are on the genitals. They are growths or bumps that may be raised or flat, single or multiple, small or large. Some cluster together forming a cauliflower-like shape.
- For females, warts can appear on the vulva, in and around the vagina or anus, on the cervix, or on the groin or thighs.
- For males, they can appear on the penis, scrotum, around the anus, or on the groin and thighs.

How do I get tested?

- Genital warts are visually diagnosed. Many people with warts are aware of bumps on the genital skin. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between a wart and other lumps and pimples on the skin, so it is good to get a health professional to check and confirm this for you to avoid confusion.
- There is no test for HPV, so you can't check if someone is carrying the virus. A routine sexual health check does not include tests for HPV but the doctor or nurse will look for warts.

How do I get treated?

Because genital warts are caused by a virus, symptoms can come and go. This can make treatment for genital warts frustrating. An average person usually requires several treatments to clear genital warts. Although treatments get rid of the warts, none of the treatments are a cure for HPV. The virus can remain dormant in the skin after treatment. In many cases warts do not return after a course of treatment, but they sometimes return after a few years.

There are several treatments available and health professionals will be able to discuss this with you, as no one treatment is suitable for all people or for all types of warts. Treatments include self-applied skin paint or cream, freezing, or surgical removal. Factors which influence which treatment is used include the size and number of warts and where they are on your body.

What do I tell my partner(s)?

If you are in a relationship, it is sensible to have a discussion about sexual health so that you both have the chance to share information. Partners of people with genital warts usually carry the HPV virus, even though they may not have any visible warts themselves. Partners should be offered information and should be advised to get a general sexual health check for other STIs. It can be difficult to talk to your partner about genital warts and your doctor, nurse or counsellor can help you manage this.

Important advice

- Be sure you understand the treatment instructions and what to do about discomfort after treatment, and when to seek help.
- Be patient. Treatment often takes several visits and a variety of approaches.
- It is recommended that you avoid sexual contact with the treated area while it is healing, to protect it from friction and allow it to heal.
- If you are pregnant, or think you might be, tell your health provider so that a treatment can be chosen which will not affect your baby.
- Women with genital warts should have routine cervical smears. Most warts are not precancerous and more frequent smears are not required.

Important information

- Genital warts are due to a **common virus** in sexually active people.
- Everyone who is eligible for the vaccine should get it.
- Most people with the virus don't have visible warts but they can still pass on the virus. Warts are diagnosed visually. There is no test for the virus.
- Treatment for warts often takes several visits. There is no treatment for carriers of the virus.
- If you are pregnant or think you might be, tell your health provider.
- Women with genital warts are not at greater risk of cancer but should have routine **cervical smears**.

The Ministry of Health supports the use of these clinical guidelines, developed by clinical experts and professional associations to guide clinical care.

This patient information leaflet has been produced by NZSHS. Every effort has been taken to ensure that the information in this leaflet is correct at the time of publishing (September 2017).