

Genital Warts and Human Papillomavirus

Genital warts are caused by some types of Human papillomavirus (HPV) that infect the genital and anal skin. HPV infection is very common. Condoms can help prevent HPV transmission.

What are genital warts?

Genital warts are warts on the genital and anal skin. They are caused by a virus called the *human papillomavirus* (HPV). There are many types of HPV that can infect the genital and anal area. Only some of these HPV types cause genital warts. Genital warts can develop anywhere in the genital area, including the vulva, vagina, cervix (neck of the womb), penis, scrotum and anus. Very occasionally warts can develop in the mouth.

Some types of HPV (which are different to the types that cause genital warts) can increase the risk of genital cancers.

Are there any symptoms?

Only a small number of people infected with HPV develop visible warts. The first sign of genital warts are growths or lumps in the genital and/or anal area which can appear up to 3 - 12 months after infection with HPV. Warts are usually painless.

How are they transmitted?

Genital HPV is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact, usually through vaginal or anal sex and occasionally through oral sex. HPV can be transmitted even when no warts are visible.

Who is at risk?

All sexually active people are at risk of genital HPV infection. Genital HPV is so common that 80 of every 100 sexually active people will have been exposed to at least one type of HPV during their lifetime. This exposure often occurs soon after becoming sexually active.

How are they prevented?

Condoms can reduce the risk of HPV transmission but are not completely effective because they do not cover all areas where the virus can be present.

HPV vaccines protect against some strains of HPV that can cause cervical cancer. The HPV vaccine now offered to girls in their early teens at school also protects against the most common types of HPV that cause genital warts. The vaccination of teenage boys is being considered.

Women should have regular Pap smears to detect cell changes on the cervix, which if untreated, may develop into cervical cancer. Early detection and treatment can prevent cervical cancer.

How is it diagnosed?

Genital warts can be detected by checking for visible warts on the skin around the genitals and anus.

How is it treated?

Warts in themselves are not harmful, and if left untreated can occasionally disappear by themselves. However they can also increase in size and number, making them more difficult to treat. Genital warts can be treated by freezing, burning, or by applying special wart paints or creams that are available on prescription. Wart paints for treating warts on other parts of the body (eg hands or feet) are too strong and can damage the genital skin. Warts sometimes reappear after treatment so you may need more than one course of treatment.

Telling partners

If you have been diagnosed with genital warts, it is important to tell your sexual partner so they can be checked and treated if necessary.

The information in this fact sheet is general and you should see a doctor if you are worried about your health.

For more information contact your doctor or the NSW Sexual Health Infoline freecall 1800 451 624.