

Human Papilloma Virus/Genital Warts

Genital Warts are caused by a virus called the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). HPV is transmitted through sexual contact and is very contagious. There are more than 100 types of HPV. We categorize them into two groups, low-risk HPV and high-risk HPV. The low-risk virus is associated with genital warts and the high-risk is associated with cervical changes that can lead to cancers of the cervix, vulva, vagina, anus, and penis if left untreated.

- HPV is thought to be the most common sexually transmitted viral infection (about 79 million in the U.S.) Approximately 14 million new cases each year & an estimate 80% of sexually active people contact this virus in their lives.
- An estimated 3 million cases of HPV are diagnosed every year.
- A study by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) reported that almost one half of all men and women with HPV had no obvious symptoms.
- Not everyone with HPV gets genital warts or abnormal pap smears
- Most people do not know they have HPV because they do not have the warts or abnormal pap smears. They can still be passing HPV to others.

What are the symptoms of Genital Warts?

In women, genital warts can occur:

- on the vulva, on the labia, , inside the vagina, on the cervix, around the anus
- In men, warts generally occur:
on the tip of the penis, on the shaft of the penis, on the scrotum, around the anus
- The incubation time can last from 3 - 8 months to many years before symptoms appear. This means that someone can have the virus for a long time without having any visible signs or warts. Even if no visible warts exist, the virus can spread from one partner to another. **HPV often does not cause visible symptoms and many people may not be aware that they carry the infection!**

What do Genital Warts look like?

Genital warts have a cauliflower appearance, and are whitish on the tip of the raised, rough, bumps. Genital Warts may appear pink or skin colored. They can be impossible to see without a colposcope if they are present on the cervix, this is a procedure that may be required after an abnormal pap test. The procedure is called a colposcopy.

How can I get Genital Warts?

Genital Warts are transmitted through:

- vaginal/penile sex, anal sex, oral sex, or manual stimulation (fingering or rubbing your partner's genitals)
- you can pass HPV by very close skin to skin contact, such as skin touching your partner that is not covered by a condom

How can I prevent or protect against Genital Warts?

Genital Warts can be prevented by:

- practicing abstinence
- practicing monogamy with an uninfected partner

You can reduce your risk of contracting Genital Warts by:

- using a latex condom or other latex barrier every time you have sexual contact with anyone, the virus may be in semen even if no warts are present
- avoiding sexual contact with partners who have visible signs of genital warts
- limiting your number of sexual partners

Am I at risk? Should I be tested?

There are a number of types of HPV, there are types that cause genital warts and there are types that cause abnormal Pap Smears. If you have unprotected sex, have had more than one sexual partner, or if your sexual partner has ever had sex with someone else, you could be at risk for Genital Warts/HPV.

For women, Genital Warts/HPV may be detected through a routine pelvic examination and Pap smear with results that came back as an abnormal pap test. **It is important to have a regular Pap Smear to make sure your cervical cells are healthy and normal.** If a Pap smear is abnormal, then your health care provider may run another test from the same pap test. If this result is positive for “high risk” type of HPV, you may be advised to have a colposcopy because you are at risk of cell changes that can lead to cervical cancer. A colposcopy allows your healthcare provider to look closely at your cervix and obtain a biopsy for further diagnosis. If HPV goes undetected, it can cause cell changes in the cervical tissue which may become cancerous over time.

What can I do to treat Genital Warts?

If you have been diagnosed with Genital Warts, you will be treated at the clinic with a liquid solution called Trichloroacetic Acid (TCA) which is applied directly to the warts. Although treatment can eliminate visible warts, it does not cure the virus and warts often reappear after treatment. Sometimes, it is necessary to repeat the treatment in order to remove the warts. If TCA does not remove warts, there are other treatments available from other health care providers. Some women are candidates for medication they can apply at home to treat the genital warts. You may be prescribed a topical cream to use at home called Aldara or Condylox. Please be sure to follow all instructions on where and how to apply the medication you are prescribed. Please note, even though the warts may disappear, you are still a carrier for the virus and can transmit this to others. Some genital warts require surgical or laser removal. During treatment keep the area clean and dry and wear loose breathable clothing and do not shave over the area.

Are there side effects from TCA treatment?

TCA treatment can often be uncomfortable. There are several things you can do after TCA treatment to make yourself more comfortable and to help the healing process:

- sit in a tub of bath water 2-4 times a day for 15 minutes
- apply antibiotic ointment, zinc oxide, or another first aid cream to the area

- apply cool water or ice packs to help any burning sensation.

Should my partner be treated?

It is important that your partner see his/her health care provider for an exam and treatment if he/she has any unusual sores or raised rough bumps in the genital area.

Your current partner may benefit from seeking a health professional for counseling and getting checked for genital warts and other STDs. It is not clear if there is any health benefit to telling future sex partners about a past diagnosis of genital warts (once warts are treated). That's because it is not known if or how long you would remain contagious after treatment.

Is there any follow-up care?

- If you have an abnormal Pap smear, be sure to follow the instructions for your follow-up care.
- If you should become pregnant, it is important to let your health care provider know that you have a history of Genital Warts/HPV. Sometimes, Genital Warts recur during pregnancy and can cause some minor complications during delivery, or are passed to the baby's throat if they are present at the time of delivery. If your health care provider is aware of your history, these can be avoided.
- It is important that you and your partner practice safer sex by using a latex condom or other latex barrier **every** time you have sex. **Even if you have been treated, the genital warts may reappear in the future.**
- It is important to do self-examinations to see if there are any visible warts or recurrences.
- Follow up in 7-10 days for another application of TCA.

For more information visit: American Social Health Association at <http://www.ashastd.org/>
Center for Disease Control and Prevention at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/>