

Genital warts are lumps on the skin caused by human papillomavirus (HPV), which is a sexually transmissible infection (STI).

What causes genital warts?

Genital warts are caused by HPV, with different strains of the wart virus affecting various parts of the body. There are at least 100 types of HPV, and at least 40 types can infect the genitals. The types of HPV that cause most genital warts are not usually dangerous, however there are types of HPV that can lead to cancer of the cervix, penis or anus.

What are the symptoms of genital warts?

Genital warts appear as small flesh coloured, dark or pale growths on the vulva, in or around the vagina or anus, on the cervix, the penis, scrotum, groin or thigh. Sometimes people do not notice warts if they grow where they can't easily be seen or felt. Genital warts may cause symptoms like itching, pain or bleeding, but usually they don't cause any symptoms.

How did I get genital warts?

HPV is spread by direct skin-to-skin contact during vaginal or anal sex with someone who is infected with the virus. HPV can also be spread through oral sex but this is less common. Warts can appear within several weeks or months after sexual contact with a person who has the virus. You may not notice them for some time.

How are genital warts diagnosed?

Warts are usually diagnosed by a health professional examining your skin. Sometimes they may be diagnosed from a small skin sample (called a biopsy) which is sent to a laboratory.

You should have a check-up for HPV if you:

- notice any unusual growths or bumps in your genital area
- notice any unusual itching, pain or bleeding in your genitals
- your sexual partner tells you they have HPV.

What is the treatment for genital warts?

There are several treatments available for genital warts including paints, creams, freezing and sometimes surgical removal. The size, number and location of the warts, cost, convenience, side effects and patient choice all affect the treatment option your healthcare provider recommends.

How can I reduce my risk of contracting genital warts?

HPV is spread by skin-to-skin contact, so using condoms can reduce your risk of getting or transmitting genital warts.

Can genital warts be prevented?

Vaccines which provide protection against some strains of HPV are available in Australia through school-based programs or your health care provider. Talk with your health care provider about vaccination.

Smoking increases your risk of developing genital warts if you have been exposed to HPV. Treatment can take longer, and it can be common to get more warts if you smoke. If you have genital warts and you are a smoker, you should consider quitting smoking. Your GP can give you more information about quitting, or you can contact Quitline on 13 78 48.

If you need more information or have any questions, please contact the Canberra Sexual Health Clinic on (02) 5124 2184.

References

Victorian Sexual Health Network (2020) Genital Warts and HPV factsheet. <https://www.staystifree.org.au/get-the-facts/genital-warts-hpv>

Carusi, D.A. (2019) Patient Information: Genital warts in women. <http://www.uptodate.com/contents/genital-warts-in-women-beyond-the-basics>

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