

Genital Warts

What is a genital wart?

A genital wart is a small growth on the skin on or around the genitals or anus. They are caused by a virus called human papillomavirus (HPV). There are many types of HPV. Some cause warts on the skin or genitals, but are not harmful. Others can cause infections that may lead to cancer of the cervix, penis, anus, throat, or mouth.

Who is at risk of genital warts?

All sexually active people are at risk. Unprotected sex and sex with multiple partners increases the risk. A weakened immune system also increases the risk.

How can I tell if I have genital warts?

You may not have any symptoms, or you might have skin-colored, pink, or brown lesions around the genitals (penis, vulva, vagina, or anus). They may or may not itch, bleed, or interfere with going to the bathroom or sex.

You should see your doctor if you think you might have genital warts. He or she will examine you, but no special tests are needed.

How are genital warts treated?

Treatment is based on what you and your doctor think is best. Genital warts are not dangerous,

so you might choose not to treat them. Another option is a prescription cream that you apply for a few months. Your doctor can freeze or cut the warts off, or use a laser to remove them. This might take more than one visit.

No treatment gets rid of all warts every time. Even if no warts can be seen, there may be areas of the skin that are infected with HPV. This can cause warts to develop later. Genital warts can occur more than once.

How can I prevent genital warts?

If you are younger than 26 years, you can get the HPV vaccine (Gardasil). This is a series of three shots that decreases your risk of genital warts and HPV-related cancers. If you are sexually active, use barrier protection such as condoms. Condoms decrease the spread of HPV but do not stop it completely.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource

<http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/genital-warts.html>

American Sexual Health Association

<http://www.ashastd.org/std-sti/hpv/genital-warts.html>

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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