



Genital Warts

What are genital warts?

Genital warts is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection. Most people with HPV do not develop symptoms or health problems from it. In 90 percent of cases, the body's immune system clears HPV naturally within two years. There are over 140 strains of HPV. Almost all genital warts are caused by two strains of HPV.

How do you get genital warts?

Genital warts is spread:

- Through anal, vaginal or oral sex.
- From close skin-to-skin contact with an infected person.
- Rarely, mothers can pass genital warts to their babies during childbirth. Infected babies can get respiratory papillomatosis, or warts in the throat.

Can you protect yourself from genital warts?

The best ways to avoid genital warts are:

- Not having oral, vaginal or anal sex (abstinence).
- Getting the HPV vaccine. The vaccine, which is approved for young men and women ages 9 to 26, is extremely effective at preventing genital warts. The vaccine will not cure existing cases of genital warts, so it is best to get it before becoming sexually active.

If you are having sex:

- Limit your number of sex partners. Use a latex condom correctly each time you have sex. A condom provides about 70 percent protection against HPV, but warts may be found in areas that a condom does not cover (e.g. the thigh).
- Do not have sex under the influence of drugs (including alcohol), which can impair your judgment.

What are the symptoms of genital warts?

Warts may appear three weeks to several years after contact with an infected person. Even without visible warts, the virus is present in an infected person and can be spread.

Symptoms may include warts that are pink, red or flesh colored; flat or raised; single or in clusters. Some warts are very small and hard to see. If you have symptoms of genital warts, call a health care provider or the Guilford County Department of Public Health.

Are genital warts dangerous?

Genital warts do not turn into cancer and rarely cause ongoing health problems. If left untreated, they may go away on their own, remain unchanged, or increase in number. Other strains of HPV are associated with cervical, anal, vulvar, vaginal, penile and oropharyngeal (throat) cancers, which can be very dangerous.

How do you treat genital warts?

Visible genital warts can be removed by the patient him or herself with prescribed medications. They can also be treated by a health care provider. Some people choose not to treat warts, but wait to see if they disappear on their own. No one treatment is better than another. Do not use over-the-counter wart removal medications. They will not cure genital warts and may be harmful.

Can you still have sex?

Yes. But you need to remember:

- Talk to your partner(s) about HPV.
- Do not have sex if you or your partner have visible warts.
- Use a latex condom each time you have sex to reduce the risk of spreading the virus to others.
- Genital warts can be passed from one person to another even though no warts are seen.

Who can I call for more information?

American Social Health Association Hotline: 1-800-227-8922, or visit www.ashastd.org .

Guilford County Department of Public Health, Greensboro or High Point: 336-641-7777, or visit www.myguilford.com