

## Warts

Warts are small skin growths caused by viral infections. There are over 100 types of human papilloma virus (HPV) that are responsible for many different types of warts. Warts can range in appearance from slender threads to hard, calloused lumps. About 65 per cent of wart infections go away without medical treatment.

Warts are a common skin complaint, particularly in childhood. Some estimates suggest that up to one in five children have warts, with children aged 12 to 16 years most commonly affected. Without medical treatment, about 65 per cent of wart infections spontaneously go away by themselves. There is no link between warts and the development of skin cancer.

### Symptoms of warts

The characteristics of a wart depend on the type, but can include:

- A small, raised bump may appear on the skin.
- The average size can range from one to 10 millimetres.
- The wart may have a rough or smooth surface.
- Warts can occur singly or in clusters.
- In some cases, the wart may itch.
- Face, feet, knees and hands are most commonly affected.

### A range of warts

There are many types of warts caused by HPV. Some of these types include:

- **Common warts (verruca vulgaris)** – these look like hard, raised lumps with rough surfaces. Any body part can be affected, but the knees and hands are the most common sites.
- **Flat warts (verruca plana)** – these look like smooth, flattened lumps. Any body part can be affected, but the face, lower legs and hands are the most common sites.
- **Filiform warts** – these look like thin, long threads. The face is usually affected, particularly near the eyelids and lips.
- **Mosaic warts** – these appear as a group of tightly clustered warts. The hands and soles of the feet are most commonly affected.
- **Plantar warts** – these look like small, hard bumps, and can have tiny black dots on them. The soles of the feet are most commonly affected.
- **Genital warts** – these look like grey or off-white lumps with a grainy 'cauliflower' appearance. Since genital warts are sexually transmitted, the penis, vulva and anus are most commonly affected.

### Transmission of warts is by direct contact

Warts are transmitted by direct contact. A person who has warts on their hands, for example, can spread the infection to other areas of their own body (autoinoculation) by scratching. The incubation period varies from one to 12 months, depending on the type of virus. Some researchers suspect that certain types of HPV can lie dormant for more than three years.

### Risk factors in developing warts

Anyone can develop warts, but certain factors increase the risk including:

- Injuries to the skin
- Skin infections that break the skin surface
- Frequently getting the hands wet
- Hands or feet that sweat heavily (hyperhidrosis)
- Swimming in public swimming pools
- Nail biting
- Direct contact with other people's warts
- Scratching or shaving your own warts, which can spread the infection to other areas of your body.

## Diagnosis of warts

Some warts share characteristics with other skin disorders such as molluscum contagiosum (a different type of viral skin infection), seborrhoeic keratosis (benign skin tumour) and squamous cell carcinoma (skin cancer). It is important to see your doctor for a proper diagnosis. Tests may include a biopsy, where a small piece of the wart is removed and examined in a laboratory.

## Wart treatment options

There are many different treatments for warts. Make sure you talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of your chosen treatment as some cause scarring. Warts can be stubborn, so you may need to use more than one type of treatment.

Some of the wart treatment options include:

- **Do nothing** – about 65 per cent of wart infections clear up by themselves within two years, without any medical intervention. This 'wait and see' approach isn't recommended for people with severe wart infections, or for those who have had their warts for more than two years.
- **Topical (applied to the skin) chemicals** – such as salicylic acid, formalin or topical retinoids. Some topical agents can be harmful to healthy skin tissue, which means they are best applied by your doctor or dermatologist. Other topical agents can be applied yourself. It may take three months or more for the treatment to get rid of the warts.
- **Immune system stimulator** – such as imiquimod differs from other topical therapies because it stimulates the immune system to fight the viral infection. A similar way to invoke the immune system is with DNCB (dinitrochlorobenzene). A person is made hypersensitive to this chemical and then low concentrations of this are applied around the wart encouraging immune cells to invade and destroy the wart.
- **Injections** – warts that are resistant to topical chemicals may be treated with injections of antiviral drugs.
- **Oral drugs** – such as cimetidine. Some studies have found that taking oral cimetidine may be no more effective at treating warts than a placebo (a medical treatment that is inactive such as a sugar pill).
- **Cryotherapy** – the warts are frozen with liquid nitrogen. It may take up to four months of regular cryotherapy to get rid of the warts. However, this treatment doesn't work in about one third of cases.
- **Laser therapy** – laser is used to burn off the warts. Scarring may occur in some cases.
- **Electrosurgery** – if the wart infection is extensive, it may be necessary to pare back the growths and cauterise their 'roots'. In some cases, the warts return after a few months. Scarring is a possible side effect of electrosurgery.

## Genital warts

If you suspect you have genital warts, you should see your doctor about treatment. A Pap test should also be done to see if the wart virus has caused some cell changes (dysplasia) on the cervix. If dysplasia is present then you may need an examination called a colposcopy. This is where the doctor uses a magnifying instrument to look at the vagina and cervix and little pieces of tissue are removed (biopsies) for further examination.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Chemist
- Dermatologist

## Things to remember

- Warts are small skin growths caused by viral infections.
- Warts are a common skin complaint, particularly in childhood.
- Without medical treatment, about 65 per cent of wart infections go away by themselves.
- Make sure you talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of your chosen treatment as some cause scarring.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

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