

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Genital warts

If you have genital warts, you might be embarrassed and upset. But genital warts aren't usually serious, and treatments work well.

What are genital warts?

Genital warts are bumpy lumps that usually grow near your genitals. But this type of wart can also grow around your nose or mouth.

Genital warts can be flat or lumpy, look like a cauliflower, or be on a stalk. Warts on moist skin (such as the skin near the vagina or on the penis) are usually soft and flesh-coloured. You can have just one wart or lots of them.

Genital warts are caused by a virus called the human papillomavirus (HPV for short). There are nearly 100 types of HPV. But 9 in 10 people who get genital warts have been infected with HPV type 6 or type 11. Some other types of HPV cause cancer of the cervix (cervical cancer) in women.

HPV spreads from one person to another by skin contact. The virus can be spread:

- If you have sex (including oral sex and anal sex)
- If your genitals touch your partner's genital area, even if you do not have sex
- If you touch your partner's genital area (for example, with your fingers)
- If your partner touches you after touching his or her genitals.

You can be infected with HPV but have no symptoms. So even though you or your partner might not see any genital warts, the virus can still spread between you.

If you're pregnant

Genital warts sometimes grow larger during pregnancy. This can make passing urine difficult. Or if the warts are inside the vagina, they can cause problems during birth.

There is also a very small chance that your child could get warts growing in their voice box (larynx) or the air passages into their lungs after they are born. These warts usually need to be removed with surgery. But they can grow back.

If genital warts are blocking your vagina or there's a risk that they will bleed a lot during labour, your doctor might advise you to have a caesarean section. But there's no evidence that having a caesarean section reduces the risk of passing the virus to your baby.

Some treatments for genital warts are safe to use during pregnancy. But creams and other treatments that you put on warts might not work so well during pregnancy. Also, your genital warts might clear up on their own after you have your baby and your immune system recovers. So it might be worth waiting a while before you decide to have treatment.

Genital warts

What are the symptoms?

Genital warts often don't cause any symptoms. But they can occasionally cause pain or itchiness. They may also make it hard to have sex, because they can block the vagina.

Your doctor will probably decide whether you have genital warts by examining you. He or she might take a sample of tissue (a biopsy) to make sure that you don't have anything more serious. Genital warts are almost always benign (non-cancerous).

What treatments work?

If your genital warts are not causing you any trouble, you might want to wait to see if they clear up by themselves. But if you are bothered by them, there are many treatments that can help.

Topical treatments

There are a few creams and lotions that you or your doctor can put on your genital warts. They all work well.

- **Imiquimod** is a cream. Its brand name is Aldara. It helps to get rid of warts and can reduce the chances of the warts coming back. Imiquimod cream can make your skin inflamed and itchy. You shouldn't use imiquimod if you're pregnant.
- **Podophyllotoxin** is a cream or solution that you put on your genital warts. Its brand names are Condyline and Warticon. Podophyllotoxin can irritate and burn your skin, causing pain and itching. It can occasionally make the foreskin and head of the penis inflamed in men who aren't circumcised. You shouldn't use podophyllotoxin if you're pregnant.
- **Podophyllin** is a treatment that your doctor paints onto your warts. It can be done in the doctor's surgery. You might need to have several treatments. Podophyllin can cause pain, redness, and irritation. You shouldn't use podophyllin if you're pregnant.
- **Acids** may be used by your doctor to dissolve your warts. Trichloroacetic acid can cause irritation and scabs. It is safe to have acid treatment if you're pregnant.

Surgery

There are various ways to treat genital warts with surgery. Surgery doesn't usually cause any serious problems if you're pregnant.

- During **cryotherapy**, your doctor freezes off your warts using liquid nitrogen. You may need to have this done a few times, with one to three weeks between treatments. Cryotherapy can sometimes cause an infection, but this is rare.
- During **electrosurgery**, doctors use an electrical current to heat up your genital warts to get rid of them. It is also called **diathermy** or a **loop electrosurgical excision procedure** (LEEP). It works well, but warts can come back. Electrosurgery can cause scarring, swelling, and pain (both generally and during sex).

Genital warts

- Your doctor can treat your warts with a **laser**, which is a highly focused beam of light. It works well but can cause pain and scarring.
- Your doctor can **cut away** your genital warts with surgery. This will probably be done with a local anaesthetic so you won't feel anything. But you might feel some pain afterwards. You might also get a scar.

Can genital warts be prevented?

Using condoms whenever you have sex can reduce your risk of being infected with HPV. But condoms don't offer complete protection from the virus. That's because HPV spreads by skin-to-skin contact. So although some parts of the genitals are protected by a condom, not all the skin in that area is. Also, it's possible to get the virus on your fingers and spread it to another person that way.

A vaccine is available to help prevent genital warts. It can also help to protect against cervical cancer in women. The vaccine is called Gardasil. But you may not be able to get this on the NHS. You will probably need to go to a private clinic and pay for Gardasil if you want it.

The vaccine is designed to be given to girls or women between the ages of 9 and 26 as three injections over six months. It is being studied for use in boys and men as well.

What will happen to me?

Genital warts can clear up on their own as your immune system fights off the virus. But this can take many months or years. If you have a weak immune system, you might not get rid of the warts so easily. For example, you have a weak immune system if you have HIV or AIDS, or if you've had a transplant or have cancer.

Genital warts often come back several months after you've had treatment to get rid of them. This is more likely to happen if your immune system is weak.

This information is aimed at a UK patient audience. This information however does not replace medical advice. If you have a medical problem please see your doctor. Please see our full Conditions of Use for this content <http://besttreatments.bmj.com/btuk/about/12.html>.

BMJ^{Group}