

Genital Warts

What are genital warts?

Genital warts are a very common sexually transmitted infection (STI). They are caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV – generally types 6 and 11). They can occur anywhere on the genitals, around the anus or inside the vagina. Genital warts are the most common sexually transmitted infection in young sexually active people. There are many types of wart virus – the genital ones are different from the ones that cause “ordinary” warts on your hands and feet for example.

How do you get genital warts?

The virus is transmitted by skin to skin contact – such as during any type of sex. Because there is more viruses around when people have warts, HPV is most likely to be spread then. However the virus can be present in normal looking skin and be passed on. Using a condom is an important way of preventing infection. But because warts may not be covered by the condom, it may not give 100% protection.

What other problems can it cause?

- Some types of HPV can cause cancer of the cervix, penis and anus.
- Every two years, sexually active women should have a Pap smear test to look for signs of HPV infection or cell changes that could lead to cancer.

What tests do you do?

- Except for Pap smears, there are no tests that are routinely done to look for HPV in warts.
- Tests should be done to look for other STIs and HIV.

What is the treatment?

- In almost all cases, genital warts will eventually go away without treatment, but this could take a long time.
- There is a range of treatments which can remove the warts more quickly.
- A doctor or nurse can treat the warts by freezing, burning or painting the affected areas with a lotion. This usually takes a number of visits.
- Other creams that you can apply yourself may be suitable.
- Treatment is generally effective in making the warts go away but does not necessarily get rid of the virus from the skin.
- Quite often the warts will come back and need another round of treatment.

