

Genital Warts

Genital warts are a type of sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). You can get genital warts through vaginal, oral, or anal sex. Genital warts appear as a small bump or group of bumps in the genital area. There is no treatment for HPV, but genital warts can be treated by your doctor.

Q: How do you get genital warts?

A: Nearly all cases of genital warts are caused by HPV.

Genital warts are spread most often through direct skin-to-skin contact during vaginal or anal sex. HPV, the virus that causes genital warts, can be spread even if the person does not have any genital warts that you can see.

Rarely, genital warts are spread:

- By giving oral sex to someone who has HPV or genital warts
- By receiving oral sex from someone who has HPV or genital warts on his or her mouth, lips, or tongue
- During childbirth from a woman to her baby

Q: What are the signs and symptoms of genital warts?

A: Genital warts usually appear as a small bump or group of bumps in the genital area. They are flesh-colored and can be flat or look bumpy like cauliflower. Some genital warts are so small that you cannot see them.

In women, genital warts can grow:

- Inside the vagina
- On the vulva, cervix, or groin
- In or around the anus
- On the lips, mouth, tongue, or throat (this is very rare)

In men, genital warts can grow:

- On the penis
- On the scrotum, thigh, or groin
- In or around the anus
- On the lips, mouth, tongue, or throat (this is very rare)

Genital warts can cause itching, burning, and discomfort. Talk to your doctor if you think you have genital warts.

Q: How are genital warts treated?

A: There is no cure for HPV, but genital warts can be removed. If you decide to have warts removed, do not use over-the-counter medicines meant for other kinds of warts. There are special, prescription-only treatments for genital warts. Your doctor or nurse must prescribe the medicine for you.

Your doctor or nurse may apply a chemical to treat the warts in the doctor's office or may prescribe a cream for you to apply at home. Surgery is also an option. Your doctor may:

- Use an electric current to burn off the warts
- Use a light/laser to destroy warts
- Freeze off the warts
- Cut out the warts

Treatment can only remove the genital wart. Treatment does not cure HPV, the virus that causes genital warts.

Q: Do I have to treat genital warts?

A: No. Some people choose not to treat genital warts. If left untreated, genital warts may go away, stay the same, or grow in size and number. They will not turn into cancer.

Q: How can I prevent genital warts?

A: The best way to prevent genital warts or any STI is to not have vaginal, oral, or anal sex.

If you do have sex, lower your risk of getting an STI with the following steps:

- **Get vaccinated.** The Food and Drug Administration recently approved one HPV vaccine (Gardasil 9) that protects against HPV types that cause most genital warts.
- **Use condoms.** Condoms are the best way to prevent STIs when you have sex. Make sure to put the condom on before the penis touches the vagina, mouth, or anus.

HPV, the virus that causes genital warts, can infect areas that are not covered by a condom. You can get genital warts from direct skin-to-skin contact. Other methods of birth control, such as birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms, will not protect you from STIs.

- **Get tested.** Be sure you and your partner are tested for STIs. Talk to each other about the test results before you have sex.
- **Be monogamous.** Having sex with just one partner can lower your risk for STIs. After getting tested for STIs, be faithful to each other. That means that you have sex only with each other and no one else.

- **Limit your number of sex partners.** Your risk of getting STIs goes up with the number of partners you have.
- **Do not douche.** Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that protects you from infection. This may increase your risk of getting STIs.
- **Do not abuse alcohol or drugs.** Drinking too much alcohol or using drugs increases risky behavior and may put you at risk of sexual assault and possible exposure to STIs.

The steps work best when used together. No single step can protect you from every single type of STI.

For more information...

For more information on genital warts, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention (NCHHSTP), CDC, HHS

Phone number: 800-232-4636 • www.cdc.gov/nchhstp

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), NIH, HHS

Phone number: 866-284-4107 • www.niaid.nih.gov

American Sexual Health Association

Phone number: 919-361-8400 • www.ashasexualhealth.org

Planned Parenthood

Phone Number: 800-230-7526 • www.plannedparenthood.org

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