

Warts

What causes warts?

Warts are a type of infection caused by viruses in the human papillomavirus (HPV) family. There are at least 60 types of HPV viruses. Warts can grow on all parts of your body. They can grow on your skin, on the inside of your mouth, on your genitals and on your rectal area. Some types of HPV tend to cause warts on the skin, while other HPV types tend to cause warts on the genitals and rectal area. Some people are more naturally resistant to the HPV viruses and don't seem to get warts as easily as other people.

Can warts be caught from other people?

Yes. Warts can be passed from one person to another person. Warts on the hand may be passed to another person when that person touches the warts. It is also possible to get warts from using towels or other objects that were used by a person who has warts.

Warts on the genitals can be passed to another person during sexual intercourse. It is important to not have unprotected sex if you or your partner has warts on your genital area. In women, warts can grow on the cervix (inside the vagina), and a woman may not know she has the infection. She can then pass the infection to her sexual partner without even knowing it.

Will warts go away on their own?

Sometimes yes and sometimes no. Often warts disappear on their own, although it may take many months, or even years, for the warts to go away. Some warts won't go away on their own. It is not known why some warts disappear on their own and others do not.

Do warts need to be treated?

Generally, yes. Warts are often bothersome. They can bleed and cause pain when they're bumped. They also can grow on the face--and most people don't want to have warts on their face. Treatment also may decrease the chance that the warts will be spread to other areas of your body or to other people.

How are warts removed?

First of all, it is important to know that warts on the skin, such as on the fingers, feet and knees, and warts on the genitals are removed in different ways. Don't try any home remedies or over-the-counter drugs for warts on the genital area. You could damage your genital area by putting certain chemicals on it. Below are some ways that warts may be removed from the skin:

- **Applying salicylic acid**--For warts on places such as the hands, feet or knees, one treatment method is to put salicylic acid on the warts. To get good results, the acid must be applied every day for many weeks. After you take a bath or shower, pat your skin slightly dry with a towel. Then put salicylic acid on the warts. The acid sinks in deeper and works better when it is applied to damp skin. Before you take a shower or a bath the next day, use an emery board or pumice stone to file away the dead surface of the wart.
- **Applying cantharidin**--Your doctor may use cantharidin on your warts. With this treatment, the doctor "paints" the chemical on the wart. Most people don't feel any pain when the chemical is placed on the wart. After treatment with cantharidin, a bandage is put over the wart. The bandage can be removed in 24 hours. When mixtures of cantharidin and other chemicals are used, the bandage is removed after 2 hours. Pain and blistering of the wart will occur in about 3 to 8 hours. When you see your doctor again, he or she will remove the dead skin of the wart. If the wart isn't gone after one treatment, your doctor may want to give you another treatment.
- **Applying liquid nitrogen**--Your doctor may use liquid nitrogen to freeze the wart. This treatment is called cryotherapy. Applying liquid nitrogen to the wart causes a little discomfort. To completely remove a wart, liquid nitrogen treatments may be needed every 1 to 3 weeks for about 2 to 4 times. If no improvement is noted, another type of treatment may be tried.
- **Other treatments for warts on the skin**--Other ways to remove warts on the skin include burning the wart, cutting out the wart and removing the wart with a laser. These treatments are stronger, but they may leave a scar. Ask your doctor about the risks and benefits of these treatments before you make the decision about the kind of treatment to have for your warts.

How are warts in the genital area treated?

As mentioned above, warts on the genital area aren't treated exactly like warts on the skin. Below are some ways that warts on the genitals can be treated:

- **Applying liquid nitrogen**--Warts on the genitals may be frozen with liquid nitrogen (cryotherapy). With liquid nitrogen treatment, the doctor applies the liquid nitrogen again and again at different office visits until the warts are completely gone.
- **Applying podophyllin**--Warts on the genitals may be treated with podophyllin weekly by your doctor and washed off after 6 hours. Alternatively, you may put podofilox (Condylox) on the warts 2 times a day at home for 3 days, and then rest for 4 days. This is repeated weekly until the warts are gone.
- **CO2 laser surgery**--For large warts in the genital area, laser surgery may be needed for complete removal.
- **Interferon injections**--When genital warts don't go away after they've been treated with different methods, an interferon injection into the warts may be tried. Interferon is a chemical that our bodies make. It helps our immune system fight infection. An injection of interferon into the wart may help your body's immune system fight the virus that is causing the wart. Generally, interferon is injected into warts twice a week for up to 8 weeks or until the warts are gone.

Do warts ever come back?

Most of the time, treatment of warts is successful and the warts are gone for good. Your body's natural immunity can usually succeed in getting rid of any tiny bits of wart that may be left after a wart has been treated. If warts come back, though, see your doctor right away to talk about other ways in which the wart can be treated.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

Visit familydoctor.org for more useful information on this and many other health-related topics.

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