

Fact Sheet: Genital Warts

What are genital warts?

Genital warts are a viral, sexually transmitted disease (STD). They are caused by several types of the *human papilloma virus* (HPV). Most sexually active people will have HPV at some point in their lives.

What are the symptoms?

Genital warts begin as small bumps, often with an irregular, “cauliflower-like” surface. Genital warts may be itchy, painful, or even bleed. Many people have genital HPV with no symptoms. They can unknowingly pass it on to their partners. Symptoms may appear 2-3 months after contact with an infected person, but it can take up to 2 years before a visible wart is present.

In women genital warts are found:

- On and around the lips and opening of the vagina
- Inside the vagina and on the cervix
- Around the anus and in the rectum

In men genital warts are found:

- On the shaft of the penis, scrotum, glans, foreskin, and penis opening (urethra)
- Around the anus and on the rectum

Long-term complications:

Certain types of the HPV can lead to an increased risk for cervical and other cancers. Women with HPV should have regular Pap smears to detect any early signs of cancer.

How is it spread?

Genital warts are spread during oral, anal or vaginal sex or other skin-to-skin contact with someone who has genital warts. Genital warts can also be spread from one place to another on the same person’s body (auto-inoculation), for example, by a razor when shaving.

How is it treated?

In people with a healthy immune system, the warts will usually go away without treatment. There are several types of treatments available for genital warts. All of them remove the visible warts, but the virus will remain in the body and the person may continue to have recurrences. It is important that infected people have their warts removed by a health professional. Do not use drugs sold over the counter (i.e., Compound W). These drugs are not designed for use on genital warts and may be harmful. The most common form of treatment is a health care professional applying acid to the affected area. Cryotherapy (freezing of the area) and laser therapy are also available and usually remove the wart faster than acids do, but are more costly.

How is it prevented?

- **Don’t have sex.** You cannot give or get an STD if there is no contact with the penis, vagina, mouth or anus.
- **If you choose to have sex, be prepared.** Have condoms with a water-based lubricant on hand and use a new condom every time you have sex.
- **Limit your number of sexual partners.**
- **Telling your partner.** If you have been diagnosed with genital warts, tell anyone you have had sex with that they should consider being examined for genital warts.
- **Have regular exams if you are sexually active.** If you think you have genital warts, get checked. Your health care provider can examine you for all STDs or you can come to the Washtenaw County Adult Clinic and be seen and treated at no charge.
- **A Pap smear is an excellent test to look for HPV changes on the cervix.** Having annual Pap smears can reduce the long-term complications associated with HPV.
- **A new vaccine is available to prevent infection with 4 of the most common types of HPV.** It is available to females 9-26 years of age.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

