

### **What are genital warts?**

Genital warts are a very common sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). Genital warts are spread by skin to skin contact during vaginal, anal or oral sex. There are over 100 types of HPV that can infect human skin. About 40 of these types of HPV infect the skin of the genital area including the penis, vagina or anus and two main types that cause genital warts.

These infections can be visible or they can have no signs or symptoms. A visible infection is when you can see warts on the genitals. Warts can look different for each person and also on different parts of the body. Warts can be flat or raised, they can be single or multiple and form clusters like little cauliflowers. Subclinical infection is when there are no signs or symptoms but HPV is found inside the skin cells and is still able to be spread to others.

### **How common is HPV?**

HPV is very common. Before the Gardasil vaccination program started in 2007, it was estimated that up to 80% of people in Australia would have HPV at some time in their lives. Genital warts were most common in people when first becoming sexually active so were often seen in 18-29 year olds. The infection usually lasts for around 12-18 months before the immune system gets rid of it. Many people who have HPV have no idea that they have the infection. Only about 10% of people with HPV get warts.

### **How do you get genital warts?**

Almost all genital warts are spread through sexual contact. Most people get the HPV infection around the time they start to have sex. About two-thirds of people who have sex with someone who has genital warts will get them. Warts will usually appear within 3 months of contact. If you have HPV but have no symptoms, you can still pass on the infection to someone else. HPV is passed on through microtrauma to the skin. You cannot see the damage to the skin.

### **How can I protect myself from genital warts?**

Using condoms can help protect against HPV but they are not completely effective against HPV because they do not cover all of the skin on the genital area. You should use condoms with all casual or new partners. This will help to prevent HPV as well as other STIs.

The HPV vaccination Gardasil can protect against two of the types of HPV (HPV 6 and HPV 11) that cause genital warts. These types of HPV are found in genital warts in about 95% of cases. HPV vaccination is most effective if it is started before you become sexually active, which is why it is offered to boys and girls in Year 7 at school.

### **How are genital warts treated?**

For many people warts go away without any treatment. Warts usually go away by themselves within 1-2 years. For some people warts may not go away on their own. Because most people do not like the look of genital warts they have them treated. Treatment can reduce the risk of spreading the infection to others. Warts can be treated in many ways (although none of the treatments are 100% effective):

- with chemical solutions
- by freezing the warts
- by using a special cream that helps the body's immune system to get rid of the warts
- by surgical removal for larger warts

Treatment can get rid of the visible warts but it takes up to 12 -24 months for the virus to be completely cleared from the skin cells. For this reason, warts can come back at any time after treatment and this is most common in the first 3 months. Avoid shaving or waxing if warts are present in the pubic area. Unprotected sex is not recommended when you have visible warts on the genital skin.

If you think you have genital warts you should visit a Family Planning NSW clinic or talk to your GP and also have a full STI check-up.

### **Am I more likely to develop cervical cancer if I have genital warts?**

HPV can also infect the cervix. Some types of HPV on the cervix can cause changes in the cells in the cervix which over time might become cancer. The types of HPV that cause genital warts do not cause cervical cancer. If you have genital warts you do not need to have more regular cervical screening tests. You can talk about when your cervical screening test is due with your doctor or nurse.

**For more information**

**Family Planning NSW Talkline –**

[www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline](http://www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline) or 1300 658 886

**National Relay Service (for deaf people) –**

13 36 77

**TIS National's interpreting service –**

131 450

**Family Planning NSW HPV vaccination factsheet –**

<https://www.fpnsw.org.au/factsheets/individuals/cervical-screening/hpv-vaccination>

**Visit your nearest Family Planning NSW clinic –**

[www.fpnsw.org.au/clinics](http://www.fpnsw.org.au/clinics)

**NSW Sexual Health Infolink –**

[www.shil.nsw.gov.au](http://www.shil.nsw.gov.au) or 1800 451 624