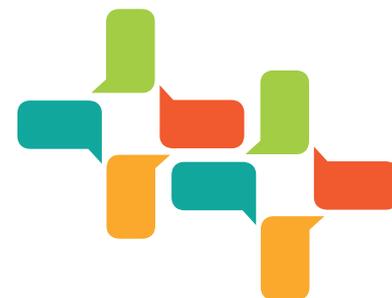


Fact Sheet

Genital warts



What are genital warts

Genital warts are a very common sexually transmissible infection (STI) caused by some types of the human papilloma virus (HPV). Genital warts are most common in people aged 18-28 years. There are more than 100 types of HPV that can infect human skin. About 40 of these infect the skin of the genital area, eg. the penis, vagina, or anus.

These infections can be visible or sub-clinical:

- visible warts: warts which are easy to see
- sub-clinical infection: you cannot see warts on your skin, but the HPV could be found inside the skin cell

How can I prevent genital warts?

Using condoms can help protect against HPV but because condoms don't cover all of the skin on the genital area they are not completely effective against HPV. You should use condoms with all casual or new partners to reduce the risk of HPV, as well as to protect yourself against other STIs.

The HPV vaccination Gardasil® can protect against two of the types of HPV (HPV 6 and HPV 11), one or both of which are found in genital warts in about 90% of cases. See our fact sheet on HPV vaccination.

How do people get genital warts?

Almost all genital warts are sexually transmitted, and most people are infected around the time they start to have sex. HPV is transmitted through microscopic damage to the skin and while condoms protect against most STIs, they are not completely effective against HPV.

The time between infection and symptoms varies a great deal, so it can be very difficult to work out how long someone has carried the infection or who gave it to them.

How common is HPV?

HPV is very common; it is estimated that up to 80% of people in Australia have had HPV at some point in their lives. Many people who have HPV have no idea that they carry the infection. Warts that you can see are very

infectious. Sub-clinical infections are also likely to be infectious to others even though you cannot see anything on the skin.

How are the warts treated?

In many people with visible warts, the warts will disappear without any treatment at all within a couple of years. However, the warts may also persist or get worse, and because most people do not like the appearance of genital warts, many prefer to have their warts treated. Treatment may also reduce the risk of spreading the infection to others.

Visible warts can be treated in various ways - with chemical solutions, freezing, laser, or by using a special cream that improves the immune system's response to the virus. However, no method is completely effective. Treatment can remove physical signs of the virus, but it may take longer before the virus is completely removed from the skin cells. For this reason, warts can come back at any time after treatment, especially in the first three months. This is even more likely to happen if the skin is irritated or damaged, and so it is important to keep the area clean and dry during treatment. You can also infect a sexual partner during this time, even if no warts can be seen on the skin. At present, there is no successful treatment for sub-clinical HPV infection.

If you have warts, you should discuss with your health practitioner whether you need to have a full STI check-up.

If I have warts, am I more likely to develop cervical cancer?

In women, HPV can infect the cervix (the neck of the womb), and certain types of HPV in the cervix can lead to pre-cancerous, or even cancerous, changes in these cells.

In general, the types of HPV that cause genital warts are different to those which can lead to cancer. If you have genital warts you do not need to have more regular Pap tests, you should just have a Pap test at the routine screening interval (usually two years) as advised by your doctor or nurse. See our fact sheet on Pap tests.

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Where can I go for advice and treatment?

- FPNSW Talkline 1300 658 886
- Family Planning clinics
- Sexual Health Clinic. To view a full listing of NSW Sexual Health Services, call the NSW Sexual Health Information Line on 1800 451 624, or visit www.health.nsw.gov.au/publichealth/sexualhealth/sexual_phus.asp
- Your local doctor

For more information

- Contact the Family Planning NSW Talkline on 1300 658 886 or go to www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline
- NRS (for deaf) 133 677

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