

Warts: genital warts

What are genital warts?

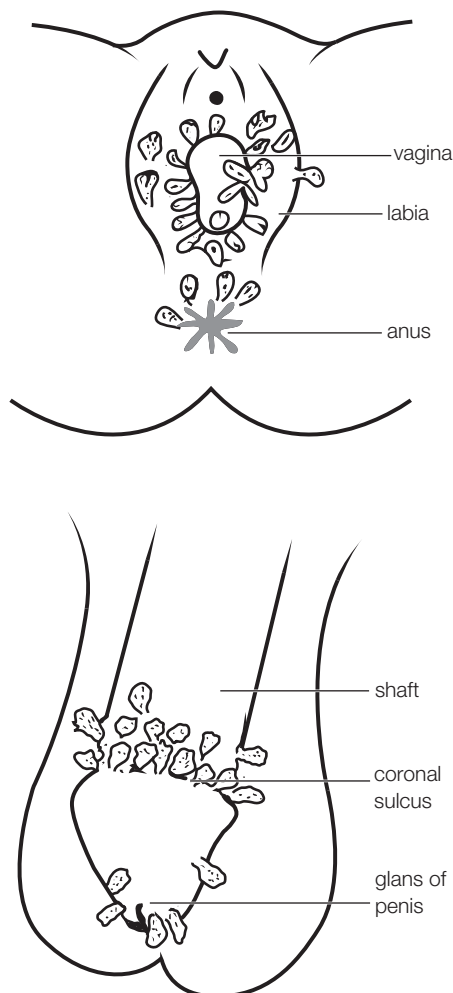
Genital or venereal warts are soft clusters of thin frond-like warts that grow on and around the external genitals of both sexes of sexually active adolescents and adults. They are not the usual hard warts that we get on our hands and other body parts but are soft thin fleshy projections that grow in clusters rather like bunches of tiny grapes or cauliflowers.

What are the symptoms?

The lumps are found on the tip of the penis in men, on the vaginal opening in women and on the anus in both sexes. They do not usually cause irritating symptoms such as pain or itching.

What is the cause?

They are caused by one of the many varieties of human papilloma virus that cause all types of warts. The infection is relatively easily spread from person to person through close human contact. It is usually spread through sexual activity and is one of the sexually transmitted (venereal) infections (STIs).



Typical sites of genital warts

However, not all cases are sexually transmitted; they may spread from warts on the fingers, especially onto a very moist vaginal area. The risk of infection increases with poor hygiene, crowded living conditions and poor nutrition. Sexually, the risk increases with multiple sexual partners, the presence of other venereal diseases and not using condoms.

Do genital warts occur in children?

Yes, they do, but it is very uncommon. If they are found, the possibility of sexual abuse must be considered. However, in the majority of children the spread is by normal intimate parent-child contact.

What are the risks?

The warts usually eventually disappear even with no treatment. Although some types of papilloma virus are associated with cervical cancer in women, the virus that causes genital warts is different and is not considered to be a strong risk factor. Regular smears should be taken as usual. Spread of the virus through sex is a problem as condoms and dams do not always give full protection. It is also appropriate to check for other STIs as these are associated with genital warts.

How can spread be prevented?

Genital warts are very contagious, so sexual activity should be avoided until all the warts heal completely; then condoms should be used during sexual intercourse. It is important not to scratch the warts and to practise good hygiene by keeping the genital area well washed and dry. Sexual partners should be informed by you, checked by their doctor and perhaps referred to a specialist clinic.

What is the treatment?

The treatment varies according to the size and proportion of the warts. Warts may be removed by chemical or physical means, e.g. electrocautery or liquid nitrogen. Treatment is therefore selected on an individual basis. The simplest treatment for small numbers of warts is podophyllotoxin paint which is usually applied two times a week by your doctor. A new but more expensive chemical agent that works through the immune system is imiquimod cream applied 3 times a week for as long as advised by your doctor.

Despite adequate treatment it is common for genital warts to recur, but they can be retreated.

Patients need good counselling and support for this embarrassing problem; thus it is vital to talk through the problem and discuss your feelings with your doctor. Follow-up visits are important.