

# What Patients Should Know When They Are Diagnosed with Genital Warts

- Genital warts are caused by a virus called genital human papillomavirus (HPV), which is very common in sexually active men and women.
- HPV is passed on through genital contact, most often during vaginal and anal sex.
- Most sexually active people will get HPV at some time in their lives, though most will never know it because HPV usually has no signs or symptoms.
- There are about 40 types of genital HPV. In most cases, HPV goes away on its own, without causing any health problems. It is thought that the immune system fights off HPV infection naturally.
- But sometimes, HPV does not go away on its own. Some HPV types can cause genital warts. Other HPV types can cause cervical cancer and other less common genital cancers. The types of HPV that cause genital warts are different from the types that can cause cancer.
- There is no treatment for HPV (a virus), but there are treatments for the conditions it can cause, including genital warts.
- It is common for genital warts to recur (come back after treatment), especially in the first three months after treatment.
- Treating genital warts will not necessarily lower your risk of passing HPV to a sex partner. You can still pass the virus on to sex partners, even after the warts are treated. It is not known how long a person remains contagious after warts are treated.
- If you don't treat genital warts, they may go away, remain unchanged, or grow in size or number. Genital warts will *not* turn into cancer over time, even if they are not treated.
- There is a very low risk that a pregnant woman with genital warts can pass HPV to her baby. In the rare cases where HPV is passed, the baby could develop warts in the throat or voice box. Cesarean births do not seem to prevent a mother from passing HPV to her baby.
- All women who have ever been sexually active, including those with genital warts, should get regular Pap tests to screen for cervical cancer. This is because a person can be infected with more than one HPV type.
- If you have genital warts, you may benefit from screening for other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

If you have questions, please write them down and ask about them during your next doctor's visit. You can also call:

**The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636); 1-888-232-6348 TTY

Operators can answer your questions in English or Spanish 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

## What Patients Should Know When They Are Diagnosed with Genital Warts—for Themselves and Their Partner(s)

- You and your partner may benefit from talking openly about your sexual health and HPV.
- You and your partner should know that:
  - There is no sure way to know when you got HPV or who gave it to you. Genital warts can be transmitted by a person without visible signs of warts. They may appear weeks, months, or years after exposure, or they may never appear.
  - Partners who have been together for a while tend to share HPV. This means that your partner likely has HPV already, even though your partner may have no signs or symptoms. It is not clear why some people with wart-causing types of HPV develop genital warts and others do not.
  - Condoms may lower your risk of passing genital warts on to your sex partner(s), if used all the time and the right way. But HPV can infect genital areas that are not protected by a condom, so condoms may not fully protect against HPV.
- Your current partner may benefit from seeing a health professional for counseling and getting checked for genital warts and other STIs.
- It is not clear if there is any health benefit to telling future sex partners about a past diagnosis of genital warts (once warts are treated). That's because it is not known if or how long you would remain contagious after treatment.
- Ways to lower your chances of getting future HPV infections include:
  - Using condoms all the time and the right way. Condoms may also lower your chances of developing other HPV-related diseases (cervical cancer in women). But HPV can infect areas that are not covered by a condom—so condoms may not fully protect you against HPV.
  - Being in a mutually faithful relationship with someone who has had no or few other sex partners.
  - Limiting your number of sex partners and choosing partners who have had few sex partners.
  - Abstaining from sexual contact is the only sure way to prevent future HPV infections.

