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## Anogenital warts (Condylomata acuminata)

**What are anogenital warts?** — Anogenital warts are small, skin-coloured or pink growths that form on the vulva (the lips of the vagina), vagina, or anus. Men can get these warts on the penis too. They are caused by a virus called human papillomavirus, or "HPV." Anogenital warts are often called just "genital warts."

HPV is spread by direct skin-to-skin contact, including sexual intercourse, oral sex, anal sex, or any other contact involving the genital area (eg, hand-to-genital contact). It is not possible to become infected with HPV by touching a toilet seat. Most people with the virus do not have visible warts, but can still transmit the virus. Treating the warts may not decrease the chance of spreading the virus. Therefore, all people who are sexually active should be regarded as potential sources of HPV, not just those with visible warts.

Warts may appear weeks to a year or more after being exposed to the virus; it is not usually possible to know when or how you became infected.

**Is HPV dangerous?** — The type of HPV that causes most forms of genital warts is not usually dangerous. But other types of HPV can lead to cancer of the cervix (a part inside the woman's body also known as the mouth of the womb)

**Do warts hurt or itch?** — Not usually. Most people with genital warts have no symptoms (other than the warts). But some people have itching, burning, or tenderness. In isolated cases it may cause bleeding.

**Is there a test for genital warts?** — No, there is no test. But your doctor or nurse should be able to tell if you have warts just by doing an exam. He or she might also take small samples of tissue (biopsy) if it is not clear what you have. But that is not usually necessary.

**How are genital warts treated?** — There are several medicines that can help get rid of warts. Some work by slowly destroying the warts. Others work by getting your body's own infection-fighting system to attack the warts.

Most medicines are lotions or gels that go on the warts. They must be applied one or more times a week for many weeks. Some medicines must be applied by a doctor or nurse. Others you can apply yourself.

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People who do not get better with medicines or who have a very big wart, or a lot of warts can have them removed. This is also an option for people who have warts that could become cancer.

There are different treatments to remove warts:

- Electrocautery, which uses electricity to burn away warts
- Traditional surgery, which involves cutting away warts
- Laser surgery, which uses light to destroy warts which I do not recommend as it spreads the virus into the air and this can be inhaled and cause warts in your airway.
- Radiotherapy – this is the same treatment used to treat cancer and is used if warts are severe.

**What if I am pregnant?** — If you are pregnant, make sure to tell your doctor before you get treated for genital warts. Some of the treatments for genital warts are safe to use during pregnancy, but others are not.

**GENITAL WARTS FOLLOW UP** — Getting rid of warts does not necessarily mean that the virus causing the warts (HPV) is gone. If warts come back, they usually do so within three to six months of treatment. This problem is more common in women with a weakened immune system (such as diabetes, HIV, or certain medications).

You should know that even if you cannot see any warts, you might still have HPV. That means that warts can come back at any time. If warts do come back, you could spread them to someone else.

**Unfortunately, there is no treatment that removes the HPV, only treatment to remove the warts caused by the HPV. This means, despite treatment they can always come back.**

**Can genital warts be prevented?** — Yes. There are now vaccines against HPV. They can help prevent infection with most of the forms of HPV that cause warts. But the vaccines can prevent infection only if you get vaccinated before you get warts.

You can also protect yourself by not having sex with anyone who is infected with HPV. But that is hard, because people do not always know that they have the virus. Condoms can help reduce the risk of infection. But they do not totally protect you. The virus can live on places on the skin not covered by a condom.

The "best" treatment for warts depends on how many warts you have, where they are located, and you and your doctors preference. Warts do not necessarily need to be treated, especially if they are not bothersome.



**WHERE TO GET MORE INFORMATION** — Your healthcare provider is the best source of information for questions and concerns related to your medical problem.

The following organizations also provide reliable health information.

- National Library of Medicine

([www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/healthtopics.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/healthtopics.html))

- American Cancer Society

([www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org), search for HPV)

- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

(<https://www.niaid.nih.gov/diseases-conditions/std-research>)

- Center for Disease Control and Prevention

([www.cdc.gov/std/HPV/STDFact-HPV.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/std/HPV/STDFact-HPV.htm))

- American Sexual Health Association

([www.ashasexualhealth.org/stdsstis/hpv/genital-warts/](http://www.ashasexualhealth.org/stdsstis/hpv/genital-warts/))