

GENITAL WARTS (HPV Infection)

Genital Warts (condylomata) are a viral infection passed by skin-to-skin contact with a person with the infection, usually during genital contact. The warts are small and painless, and grow and spread around the genitalia, perineum, inner thighs and rectum. The shape of an individual lesion may vary, including cauliflower-like, domed or flat. There may be slight itching, burning or irritation, especially if many warts are present. Warts can also be present in areas not immediately visible, including the vagina, cervix, urethra and rectum.

Genital warts are caused by the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). Some strains of HPV have been linked with abnormal pap smears and the development of cancer of the cervix in women. Some researchers feel the virus can also cause penile cancer in males. If either partner has HPV, the other should be screened/tested. Women should have an updated pap smear and possibly other tests as well.

TREATMENT:

Genital warts can be removed in several ways, including dabbing the wart with medications, such as podofilox (Condylox), imiquimod (Aldara) or trichloroacetic acid. These medications can be applied in the exam room by your healthcare provider or, in some situations, at home. Genital warts can also be removed by physical methods such as carefully targeted lasers, electricity or extreme cold (liquid nitrogen). Surgical removal of warts is less common now that modern treatments are available, but it can be a good choice if other methods are unsuccessful.

Since genital warts are viral and the virus can still be present in the skin with no visible warts, many experts feel genital warts cannot be cured. Even if warts are not visible, there is still a chance that the virus can be passed along to a sexual partner.

PREVENTION:

The only way to insure that you won't get genital warts or another sexually transmitted infection (STI) is to abstain from genital contact. However, there are several ways to decrease your chances of getting or spreading genital warts or other sexually transmitted infections:

Use Condoms: Use of a latex condom decreases the risk of getting or spreading STIs, including genital warts. Condoms are available at the EUSHS and at local pharmacies without a prescription.

Know Your Partner: The more partners you have, the greater your risk of getting an STI. Don't have close contact with a person until you know about their history and their health. After abstaining, the least risky sexual practice is to find one faithful and uninfected partner.

Don't Use Alcohol or Drugs in Potentially Intimate Situations: If your judgment is impaired, the chance of making a bad decision about sex is much higher.

Get Regular Check-ups: Anyone who is sexually involved with a partner or partners should be tested regularly. Remember that STIs often have no symptoms. The only way to be sure is to be checked.

Stay Positive: People with HPV can still have a satisfying sex life by monitoring for and treating any new visible warts, discussing the condition with potential sex partners and using latex or polyurethane barriers during genital contact.

Michael J. Huey, MD, 1992, revised 2004

Helpful Links:

The Emory Healthcare Health Connection patient information web site at <http://healthinfo.healthgate.com/GetContent.aspx?token=8482e079-8512-47c2-960c-a403c77a5e4c&chunkid=11774>.

The American Social Health Association patient information web site at <http://www.ashastd.org/stdfaqs/hpv.html>.

The American Academy of Family Physicians patient education web site at <http://familydoctor.org/x1572.xml>.

© 2004-06 Emory University, Atlanta, GA