

Anogenital warts

The basics

Anogenital warts, sometimes called genital warts, are a type of skin lump in the genital area caused by an infection with human papillomavirus, or HPV ('the wart virus'). There are over 100 strains of HPV, but most anogenital warts are caused by just two types of HPV, types 6 and 11. Both types are sexually transmitted and they are different from the HPV types that cause warts on the hands and feet, which is why anogenital warts do not usually spread to other parts of your body.

Anogenital warts can occur anywhere on the outside of the genital skin: on or around the vulva or penis, and close to the anus (back passage). Sometimes they can occur inside the anus, the vagina or on the cervix (neck of the womb) or at the opening of the urethra (where you pass urine from) in the penis or vulva.

How common are anogenital warts?

Anogenital warts are one of the most common sexually transmitted infections. It is estimated that around 4% of people (1 in 25) in Britain have had anogenital warts at some time and in 2023 over 25,000 people who came to a sexual health clinic in England had anogenital warts for the first time.

How do you get anogenital warts?

Anogenital warts are contracted from skin contact with the area where HPV (usually types 6 or 11) are present on the skin of an affected person. This can happen during vaginal, anal or oral sex, although it is thought that intimate genital contact without penetrative sex can also transmit the virus. Warts can also be spread by sharing sex toys. Rarely, warts can pass from a mother to a baby during childbirth. Anogenital warts **cannot** be spread through hugging, kissing, sharing towels or baths or from swimming pools or toilet seats.

What would I notice if I had anogenital warts?

You would see or feel small lumps on the skin in the genital area, around the anus or just inside the vagina or anus. They are usually skin coloured or slightly darker or pinkish and may feel rough to the touch. They can occur as single warts or in groups. They are not usually painful or itchy.

The time it takes for warts to develop after getting genital HPV infection is very variable. The average time is between 3 and 11 months but it could be a shorter or longer time (> 1 year) before they appear. Not all infections with HPV result

in anogenital warts. It is possible to have HPV on your skin without knowing it, including the types that cause anogenital warts. The body can clear HPV infection without treatment.

Is there a test for anogenital warts?

In most cases, warts have a typical appearance and a doctor or nurse can diagnose them just from looking. Occasionally, especially if they look unusual, you may need to have a biopsy to confirm if they are warts – that means a tiny sample of the wart is removed under local anaesthetic and then examined under a microscope.

In the UK, if you have a cervix (neck of the womb) you will be offered a smear test from the age of 25 as part of the cervical screening programme. Your smear sample will be tested for the types of HPV that are most likely to cause cervical cancer. These are not the same as the types that cause genital warts.

How are anogenital warts treated?

Most warts respond to cream treatments that you can apply yourself at home. Sometimes, warts need to be treated in clinic by freezing (cryotherapy), dehydration (desiccation), heat or laser treatment or removed surgically. Treatment is available for free via sexual health clinics in the UK. Your doctor or nurse can advise you which treatments your clinic can offer and help you to decide which is right for you. Sometimes, warts may disappear on their own without treatment, although most people prefer to have treatment so that they go more quickly.

Other important information about your treatment

Whilst most warts will go away with treatment, no treatment is 100% effective in everyone and warts can sometimes come back even after having cleared. Warts can be more persistent when you are pregnant, if you smoke or if your immune system is weakened or affected by another health condition, but having warts does not mean that there is something wrong with your immune system.

Some people can find the diagnosis of anogenital warts very distressing. Speak to your clinic about local psychological support services available.

Should I get the HPV vaccine if I have warts?

The HPV vaccines Gardasil® and Gardasil-9® are very good at preventing warts if they are given before you have ever been exposed to the wart virus. They work best if you have them before you have sex for the first time. If you have warts already, it is not yet known whether the vaccine can help them to go away or prevent them from coming back.

However, you should have the vaccine if you have never had it before and are eligible for it. In the UK, all females born after 1st September 1991 and all males born after 1st September 2006 are eligible up until their 25th birthday – please ask your GP if this applies to you. In addition, gay, bisexual and other men (including transgender men) who have sex with men, and transgender women can access HPV vaccination via sexual health clinics until their 46th birthday.

What about my partner?

It's a good idea to tell your partner if you have anogenital warts, or have had them in the past. They don't need to have any treatment unless they also have warts.

When can I have sex again?

Warts are transmitted by skin to skin contact and are easiest to pass on when visible warts are present. So waiting until your warts have cleared following treatment is likely to reduce the risk of passing them on. You can also reduce the risk of passing on warts by using a condom for sex. Condoms are most effective if they fully cover the area of skin affected by warts and are used before any skin-to-skin contact occurs. You should also avoid sex if you have just applied any creams or ointments to treat warts on your skin.

What happens if my warts are left untreated?

Without treatment your warts may increase in size and number, or stay the same. Warts can sometimes disappear on their own without treatment.

Anogenital warts in pregnancy

It is common for warts to increase in size and number during pregnancy. It is possible to have wart treatment during pregnancy although you should not use the cream or ointment treatments if you are pregnant – speak to your clinic for advice about what treatment options would be best. Warts may also go away by themselves after you have had your baby.

Can warts affect my baby?

Warts and HPV cannot be passed to your baby during pregnancy. Rarely, warts can be passed from a mother during childbirth causing warts on the baby's skin or, very rarely, in the larynx (windpipe). It is a good idea to tell your antenatal team if you have anogenital warts while you are pregnant. Usually, having warts does not affect how you should deliver your baby and is not usually a reason to need a caesarean section.

Can warts cause cancer?

It is extremely rare for warts to become cancer. The types of HPVs which cause cancer are different from the types that cause warts.

This leaflet was produced by the Clinical Effectiveness Group of the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH).

The information in the leaflet is based on the 'British Association of Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH) United Kingdom national guideline for the management of Anogenital Warts in adults (2024)'.

For more information regarding BASHH:

www.bashh.org/guidelines

The leaflet was developed following The Information Standard principles developed by NHS England.

For more information:

www.england.nhs.uk/tis/the-info-standard

If you would like to comment on this leaflet, e-mail us at:

admin@bashh.org.uk. Please type 'Warts PIL' in the subject box.

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