



Dermatology Patient Education

Warts

Warts are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is contagious, so it is easy to get this virus. Many people get a wart when they have skin-to-skin contact with someone who has a wart. You also can get a wart by touching something that touched a person's wart, such as a towel or the floor of a locker room.

The type of wart you get depends on the type of HPV that infects you and where it is located. For example, people often get a type of wart called plantar warts by walking barefoot in a pool area or locker room. You cannot get a wart from touching a toad or a frog.

TYPES OF WARTS

Common warts: These usually form on the fingers, around the nails where the virus can easily get into the body, such as near a bitten fingernail or hangnail. They also form on the back of our hands. A common wart often looks like a rough bump. You may see black dots in the wart that look like seeds. These are blood vessels. Because of these black dots, some people call these seed warts.



Common warts

Plantar warts: When common warts form on the soles of the feet, they are called plantar warts. Plantar is the medical term for the bottom of the foot. Left untreated, these warts can grow quickly. Most plantar warts are flatter than other common warts. This flattening is caused by walking, which pushes the warts into the skin. This can make plantar warts painful. It can feel like you have stones in your shoes.

Flat warts: These can be found anywhere on the skin, but are most common on the face. Shaving seems to cause these warts to spread, so flat warts are common in the beard area of men and on the legs of women. Flat warts are smaller and smoother than common warts. When people get flat warts, they usually have many warts.

Genital warts: These warts usually appear in or around the genital region. People get genital warts through sexual contact. In some cases, a mother can spread genital warts to her baby during childbirth when the baby passes through the birth canal. Any pregnant woman who has had genital warts should tell her doctor so that steps can be taken to prevent spreading the virus to her baby.

Genital warts are flesh-colored, may feel rough or smooth, and can be large or small. Some people get a single wart; others get clusters of warts.

Certain strains of genital warts can cause cancer in males and females, so it is important to treat genital warts early before they can turn into cancer. Women who have been exposed to genital warts should see a gynecologist to get screening tests for cervical cancer. This screening test allows doctors to find early signs of disease, which can be treated before cancer has a chance to develop.

THE HPV VACCINE

HPV vaccines can prevent males and females from getting some of the most common types of HPV that can cause genital warts and cancer. These vaccines do not protect against other types of warts. For the best protection, it is important to get all three shots. The vaccines should be given before a person becomes sexually active.

Treatment: Genital warts should be treated by a doctor. A few types of HPV that cause genital warts can progress to cancer. Treatment helps to get rid of the warts so that they cannot progress to cancer. Treatment also helps prevent spreading HPV to others.

GENERAL WART TREATMENT

Many other types of warts are usually harmless and tend to disappear with time. Since it can take a few months to longer than a year for warts to disappear, treatment may be recommended. Treating warts reduces the risk of spreading the virus to other parts of your body and to others.

Some wart treatments are available without a prescription. However, it is important to see a dermatologist about if you:

- Have warts in your genital area or anus
- Notice that a wart hurts, itches, or bleeds
- Have more than a few warts
- Cannot get rid of the warts with a treatment that you are using
- Are not sure if a spot on your skin is a wart or something else



Plantar warts

Dermatologists offer many wart treatments. The treatment a patient receives varies with age, type of wart, and many other considerations. No one treatment works for everyone. Some warts are stubborn and require your dermatologist to use more than one type of treatment to clear the warts.

Many wart treatments that you can buy without a prescription contain salicylic acid. Your dermatologist can prescribe a medicine that contains a stronger dose. If your dermatologist prescribes a medicine with salicylic acid, you will likely apply it every day after bathing or soaking the wart. It can take many weeks to see results. You should stop treatment, at least for a short time, if the wart or the skin around it becomes sore.

IN-OFFICE PROCEDURES

One or more of the following treatments, which your dermatologist can perform in the office, may be used. Warts can grow deep into the skin, so some patients need a few or even several treatment sessions.

Cryotherapy: Cryotherapy is a common treatment for warts. Your dermatologist will freeze the wart with liquid nitrogen, causing the wart to blister and later fall off. To prevent freezing healthy skin, patients often need more than one treatment. Some people see a lighter spot form on skin treated with cryotherapy. This is more common in people who have darker skin.

Cantharidin: Your dermatologist may treat a wart by painting it with cantharidin. This is a chemical that causes a blister to form under the wart. You may need to return to the office in about a week so that your dermatologist can clip away the dead part of the wart and re-treat any remaining wart.

Electrosurgery: This treatment destroys the wart by burning it off.

TREATMENTS FOR HARD-TO-TREAT WARTS

Some warts are more difficult to treat than other warts. Plantar warts, for instance, are hard to treat because the bulk of the wart lies below the surface of the skin. Your dermatologist may use one or more of the following therapies for hard-to-treat warts:

Excision: Your dermatologist may surgically remove (cut out) a wart.

Laser treatment: Advances in technology make laser treatment an effective therapy for some warts, but laser treatment is not necessarily the best option for all warts. Many different lasers can be used, and the number of treatment sessions a patient needs can vary.

Chemotherapy: When a wart remains despite many treatments, a chemotherapeutic medicine may be recommended. This does not mean that you have cancer. These medicines also slow the growth of HPV. Bleomycin is such a medicine. Studies show that it is very effective at clearing warts. Bleomycin is injected into the wart. Getting these shots can be uncomfortable.

5-fluorouracil (5-FU): This is a cream that can treat warts. Patients can apply it at home, usually doing so once or twice a day.

Immunotherapy: This type of therapy stimulates the patient's own immune system so that it can more effectively fight HPV. There are different medicines used to stimulate the immune system. Some are creams that the patient can apply at home. When such a cream is effective, it causes an intense skin reaction.

Another treatment that can stimulate the immune system is occlusion. This word means to shut off or close up. Covering the wart with tape is a type of occlusion. Occlusion is often used along with another treatment such as salicylic acid.



Flat warts on the face

PREVENTING NEW WARTS

The following can help prevent warts:

- Do not pick or scratch at warts. This can spread the virus to other parts of your body.
- Wear flip-flops or pool shoes in locker rooms, pool areas, and showers and bathtubs used by many people such as those in hotels and health clubs. HPV spreads easily in warm, humid conditions.
- Do not touch someone's wart.
- Keep your feet dry, as moisture helps warts spread.

Warts are common and should not cause you to worry. Warts are benign (not cancer). Your dermatologist can help make sure that warts are properly treated, giving you the best possible result.

A dermatologist is a medical doctor who specializes in treating the medical, surgical and cosmetic conditions of the skin, hair and nails. To learn more about warts, visit aad.org or call toll free (888) 462-DERM (3376) to find a dermatologist in your area.

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