



August 2011

# Genital Warts

## What are Genital Warts?

Genital warts are warts that are found in the genital area. They are usually fairly harmless, but certain types have been linked to an increased risk of genital cancer. This is why it is important to prevent the spread of genital warts.

Warts are caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV). There are about 100 types of HPV. Genital warts are caused by about 20 types of the HPV. Warts on other common parts of the body, such as hands and feet, are caused by the other types of HPV.

## How Genital Warts spread

Symptoms may appear from one month up to two years after exposure. Therefore it is difficult to know when you got the virus. Genital warts may look like or feel like hard small bumps or tiny skin tags that look like cauliflower. Larger warts may be pink, white, brown or grey, and occur alone or in clusters.

## Symptoms of Genital Warts

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Warts can develop around the genitals, in the mouth or the anus. In women, the warts can be on the vulva (vaginal lips), in the vagina and on the cervix. In men, the warts may be anywhere on the penis, scrotum or in the urethra. Both men and women can have warts in the pubic area, anus or on the thighs. Usually warts are not painful or itchy, but sometimes they may cause itching, pain during sex, vaginal or rectal bleeding.

A person can be infected with HPV without any symptoms or very few symptoms for months or even years, but still may be able to pass the infection on to a sexual partner.

## Complications of Genital Warts

- if warts are left untreated, they can block the urethra, cervix and vagina
- in women, some types of HPV can cause cell changes in the cervix. These changes have been linked to cancer of the cervix
- in men, HPV may be linked to cancer of the penis
- infants infected with HPV during delivery can develop warts in their throat

For further information, please call:  
**York Region Health Connection 1-800-361-5653**  
**TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit [www.york.ca](http://www.york.ca)**

## Can genital warts be prevented?

- Not having sex is the best way to avoid infection with HPV. The risk of being exposed to HPV increases with having sex at an early age, having many sex partners, or having sex with someone who has had many partners
- Using condoms gives some protection, but HPV might be on the skin that is not covered by the condom
- A new vaccine is available to protect against four strains of HPV. It protects against strains 16 and 18, which cause 70 percent of cases of cervical cancer in Canada. It also protects against strains 6 and 11, which cause 90 percent of the cases of genital warts. Ask your healthcare provider if you should receive this vaccine.

## How are genital warts diagnosed?

The doctor can often tell if you have genital warts by looking at them. Your doctor may apply a vinegar solution to the affected area to help find hard-to-see warts.

In women, the presence of HPV may be detected by a Pap test. During a Pap test, cells from the surface of the cervix are taken to check the health of the cells. Sometimes another more specialized test called a colposcopy is done. During a colposcopy, the doctor uses a special magnifying tool to see the cervix and upper vagina.

In men, a similar test called an endoscopy is used to see warts inside the urethra.

## How are genital warts treated?

Once you have HPV, the virus remains in your body. Treatments will remove the visible warts but will not remove the virus from the body.

Genital warts can be treated at your doctor's office or at a clinic. There are several treatments available. Your doctor may choose to apply a solution to burn off the warts. Some of the solutions used are podophyllin or trichloroacetic acid (TCA). The doctor may also use liquid nitrogen or freezing, surgery, laser or electro-cautery to remove the warts. Most people need more than one treatment to remove all the warts. The warts may come back and require further treatment.

## What about sexual partners?

HPV is very contagious. If you have HPV, your sexual partner(s) should be informed and examined. You should avoid any sexual contact when there are visible warts. Even if there are no visible warts, they may be in the vagina or urethra. The HPV remains in your body and you can still pass the virus on to your sexual partner(s). It is important to talk about HPV with your partner(s) before having sex. Using condoms during sex provides some protection from HPV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

## Is follow-up important?

All visible warts should be treated. Women with HPV should have an annual Pap test. Women with abnormal Pap tests may need more frequent Pap tests and/or colposcopy.

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## Remember:

- follow the treatment as prescribed by your doctor or clinic. Return for follow-up visits as directed
- avoid sexual or close physical contact with sexual partner(s) while your warts are being treated
- tell your partner(s) so they can be checked and treated for warts
- women with HPV should have a Pap test every year
- use condoms to reduce the chance of passing on HPV, getting other STIs and to prevent pregnancy
- it is possible to have more than one infection at a time, so it is important to be tested for other STIs

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