

Genital Warts (HPV)

Genital warts are a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the Human Papillomavirus (HPV). They can occur on the skin around or sometimes inside the penis or external genitals, vagina or internal genitals, anus, and occasionally in the mouth or throat.

Genital warts can be treated. They are a common infection in British Columbia.

Causes

You get genital warts through vaginal, oral, and anal sexual contact. This includes both penetrative sex and sexual activities where there is skin-to-skin contact. Once you have genital warts, you can pass them to others even if you don't have symptoms.

Symptoms

If you have genital warts, it is common to not notice any symptoms. If you do get symptoms, they will most likely show up anytime from a few weeks to many months after sexual contact.

Symptoms are usually painless bumps on your genitals or around your anus. They can also be inside your genitals. Genital warts can be different sizes and shapes, including flat or cauliflower-like in appearance. They are often flesh-coloured, but can also be darker than the surrounding skin.

Tests and Diagnosis

Testing and diagnosis for genital warts is done by an exam by a health care provider. The clinician will look at the bumps to determine what they are. It is best to get tested for genital warts if you are having symptoms.

Treatment

You can choose if you want to treat your genital warts. In most cases, they will go away without treatment within 18 to 24 months. The warts may go away sooner if you treat them.

Genital warts are treated by a health care provider or with prescription medications at home. Treatments are applied directly to the genital warts to stimulate your body's immune response. You may need several treatments over a 4 to 16 week period. Talk to your health care provider to find the best option for you.

Once your visible genital warts are gone, it is not known if the virus is completely gone from your body. However, many people don't get warts back unless they have a weakened immune system. You can also get genital warts again from a new exposure.

Caution: Do not use non-prescription wart removal products that you can buy in the store to treat genital warts. They are not meant for the genital area and may cause serious burning.

Sexual Partners

It is up to you if you want talk to your current sexual partners about warts. Telling your partners helps them make informed choices, but you may not want or feel safe telling your partners. You need to make the decision that is best for you.

Current partners can check themselves regularly for warts. If they notice any, they can see their health care provider for treatment.

Complications

Genital warts don't usually cause other health problems. Even though they are caused by HPV, there is almost no increased risk of developing cancer. You do not need additional cancer screening tests.

Once visible genital warts are gone, there is still a chance they could come back in the future. Serious complications include:

- higher chance of getting and passing HIV
- warts that are resistant to treatment

Pregnancy: Tell your health care provider if you are pregnant and have genital warts. You can pass the genital warts virus to your child during birth.

Prevention

The HPV vaccine can help prevent most strains of genital warts and genital cancers. This vaccine is available for people of all genders. The vaccine will not help you get rid of genital warts that you already have, but it can prevent future infections.

It is a good idea to be tested regularly for STIs, especially if you have new sexual partners or open relationships. Talking with partners about safer sex makes sure everyone knows what to expect. Condoms are great if they work for you – the correct use of condoms might reduce your chance of passing and getting genital warts.

Resources

HealthLink BC – Information about HPV and genital warts in multiple languages
<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/hpv-genital-warts>

HealthLink BC – Information about the HPV vaccine in multiple languages
<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/hpv-vaccines>

ImmunizeBC – Information about the HPV vaccine in British Columbia

<http://immunizebc.ca/diseases-vaccinations/hpv>

SmartSexResource – If you are worried or have anxiety about HPV and genital warts

<https://smartsexresource.com/topics/worry-and-anxiety>

TransCareBC – Gender-affirming sexual and reproductive health information

<http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/care-support/access-care/sexual-hlth>