

New York State Department of Health

Human Papillomavirus (HPV, genital or venereal warts)

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What are venereal warts?

Venereal warts, also called condyloma, are a common sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV) that affects the skin or mucous membranes. The virus may cause cauliflower-like fleshy growths in moist areas in and around the sex organs. In many cases, warts are not visible to the naked eye.

Who gets venereal warts?

Any sexually active person can be infected with venereal warts. Most often, venereal warts are found in young (age 15 to 30 years) people who have multiple sex partners. Those whose immune systems are compromised are more likely to become infected and to have a more serious infection than others.

How are venereal warts spread?

Venereal warts are generally spread through direct skin-to-skin contact during vaginal, anal and oral sex with someone who is infected. HPV can also be spread from mother to child (usually found in the child's throat or mouth) during birth.

What are the symptoms of venereal warts?

Venereal warts appear as soft, fleshy growths that vary in size, are frequently painless and can be raised, pointed or flat. The warts may appear singly or in clusters.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The average incubation period, which begins immediately after the initial sexual contact with an infected person, is usually two to three months but can range from one to 20 months. However, when HPV is transmitted from one person to another, the virus infects the top layers of the skin and can remain inactive or latent for months or possibly years before warts or other signs of HPV infection appear. In couples that have not had sex partners for many years, the woman may develop an abnormal Pap smear because of previous contact.

When and for how long is a person able to spread venereal warts?

HPV cannot be cured; therefore, the infected person is essentially contagious for life. Approximately two-thirds of the people who have sexual contact with a partner with genital warts will develop this disease. HPV infection can also be transmitted by people who have no visible lesions, but some researchers believe this condition is less contagious than overt genital warts.

Does past infection make a person immune?

No, previous infection with warts does not make a person immune from repeat infection.

What is the treatment for venereal warts?

Genital wart therapies can be administered by the patient or health provider. Providers can treat with a chemical called podophyllin, surgical removal or, in some cases, warts may be "frozen" and removed by a process called cryosurgery. In other cases, providers can order podofilox solution and gel, or imiquimid cream, that the patient applies as prescribed. Several treatment sessions are usually required.

What can be the effect of not being treated for venereal warts?

If a person is not treated, the warts will, in some cases, continue to grow and spread. There may be an increased risk of cancer of the cervix, vulva, penis or anus among people who are infected with particular strains of HPV in those areas.

What can be done to prevent the spread of venereal warts?

There are a number of ways to prevent the spread of venereal warts:

- limit your number of sex partners;
- use a male or female condom**;
- carefully wash genitals after sexual relations;
- if you think you are infected, avoid sexual contact and visit your local STD clinic, a hospital or your doctor;
- notify all sexual contacts immediately so they can obtain examination and treatment.

** Remember that use of condoms may prevent the virus from coming in contact with susceptible skin areas. However, since HPV can infect the scrotum and vulva, transmission can occur outside condom-covered areas.

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