

Genital Warts

This is an infection of the skin and mucous membranes caused by the human papilloma viruses (HPV) of which there are around 100 known strains or types. Genital warts may be small, difficult to see and only detected by medical examination, or they may be much larger, joining to form lesions over a centimetre in diameter.

Infection with some strains of the wart virus is associated with an increased risk for developing cervical cancer in women, and of cancer of the anus, particularly in homosexually active males.

Diagnosis is made by clinical examination. Cervical infection may be detected by a Pap smear.

The disease is usually transmitted by genital or anal intercourse. Babies may develop infection of the respiratory tract during passage through the birth canal of an infected mother.

Incubation period

(time between becoming infected and developing symptoms)

2 – 3 months, with a range of 1 – 20 months.

Infectious period

(time during which an infected person can infect others)

Unknown, but probably at least as long as a visible wart exists.

Treatment

There is no 'perfect' treatment for genital warts and not everyone with genital warts requires treatment. The decision should be made after discussion with your doctor about the advantages and disadvantages. Within three to four months, warts will disappear in 10-20% of people even without treatment. There is no strong evidence that treatment eradicates the HPV from the body or stops the transmission of infection. However, treatment may improve local symptoms and be desirable for cosmetic and psychological reasons.

Small warts can be removed easily by applying specific chemical paint to the wart. Several treatments are given, after which the warts usually disappear within a few weeks.

Because this solution may burn the nearby skin, it is applied carefully by a health worker and is not given to patients for self-application. Chemical paint is not applied to the cervix or used for pregnant women.

If genital warts are larger they may be frozen off or treated by diathermy or laser treatment. Sometimes, if the warts are very large, they are best removed surgically.

Control of spread

- > Practise safer sex – use condoms or dental dams.
- > Sexual partners of persons with genital warts should be examined for evidence of warts, including a Pap smear for women.
- > Women should have a Pap smear every two years from the age of 18 years, or two years after having sex, whichever is later.
- > Testing to exclude other sexually transmissible diseases is advisable.
- > A vaccine is now available that can prevent infection from HPV types that are known to cause cervical cancer and genital warts. Vaccination is currently available for females aged 10-26 years of age. In South Australia, girls are offered the HPV vaccine in Year 8 at school. The vaccine is delivered through the School Based Immunisation Program or available at local council immunisation clinics. Women who are fully immunised with HPV vaccine should continue to have regular Pap smears. For more information see the website below.

- > **Avoiding Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI)**

Useful websites

- > **Clinic 275**
<http://www.stdservices.on.net/std/>
- > **Immunisation Service, SA Health**
<http://www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/immunisation/071105-hpv-leaflet-web.pdf>
- > **SHine SA**
<http://www.shinesa.org.au/go/information-and-resources/choose-a-topic/sexually-transmitted-infections>