

Genital Wart Virus Infection

What is it?

Genital wart virus (also known as human papilloma virus, HPV) commonly infects the genital skin. In most people it never causes any symptoms. In a very small number of people (about 2%) it may cause the appearance of visible warts, which are exactly the same as warts which may occur in any other part of the body. In women, sometimes wart virus infections shows up in a cervical smear test, even if they do not have any visible warts on the surface of the skin.

How is genital wart virus transmitted?

There are at least 70 different types of HPV. However, only about 5 strains commonly cause infection in the genital area. The virus is passed on from one person to another by direct skin to skin contact, so the commonest way for the virus to occur in the genital area is during sexual activity. However, as most people carrying wart virus have no symptoms, this means that it can easily be transmitted without either partner realising it. It is not possible to catch wart virus infection from toilet seats or swimming pools. In exceptional cases "non-genital" strains of wart virus can pass from other parts of the body to the genital area (for example from the fingers) but this is thought to be unusual.

How common is Genital Wart Virus Infection?

Using research techniques, HPV has been detected in 30-80% of young, healthy, sexually active people, most showing no visible warts.

Which parts of the body are affected?

Wart virus infects the surfaces of the entire genital and anal areas, including the cervix (neck of the womb), vagina, water passage and rectal areas. The virus remains on the surface and does not get into the deeper tissues or the blood stream. If warts appear, they generally do so in warm, moist areas or where the body skin surfaces are rubbing together. In men, warts are most commonly found on the penis beneath the foreskin. In women, they tend to appear around the entrance of the front passage. In both men and women, warts can commonly be found around the anal area.

How can I tell if I have genital wart virus infection?

Most people are completely unaware of the fact that they are carrying this very common surface skin infection, because they have no visible warts. In women, HPV sometimes shows up in a smear test. In fact, this is an extremely common finding in smear tests and appears in 1 in 20 smears. At the moment, there is no easy routine way to detect the virus, although a number of specialised methods are sometimes used in medical research.

If warts do appear, they are usually easy to feel and appear as small soft, fleshy lumps which often appear in groups. The diagnosis can easily be confirmed by a doctor on examination.

What treatment is available?

Visible warts are treated with a range of therapies. Genito-urinary Medicine (GUM) Specialists are able to offer treatment best suited to the type, size and location of the warts. This includes the application of creams, solutions, localised freezing techniques and various other methods, which do not normally cause much discomfort. It is often necessary to repeat the treatment on one or more occasions. This is partly because the virus is usually very active in the initial stages of infection and new warts often continue to appear, until your body's immune system begins to suppress the virus. Unfortunately, there is as yet no treatment which will kill the wart virus outright.

Smoking and Wart Virus Infection

Recent research shows that smoking has a very powerful effect on the immune system's response to dealing with wart virus infection. This means that visible warts are much more likely to appear in people who smoke and also may take longer to disappear in smokers. It therefore appears likely that reducing or stopping smoking may help your body to deal with the effects of wart virus infection.

Will my partner be affected?

Judging by the fact that almost half of young sexually active people may be carrying genital HPV, this virus seems to be extremely easily passed on! It is reassuring for partners to attend the GUM clinic for a careful check up and to make sure that they understand how easily the virus is passed on between partners. This gives an opportunity to answer the many questions which a couple may have about wart virus infection.

As mentioned above, there is no test in routine use for reliable detection of HPV. Evidence that condoms help protect against transmission of the virus is lacking. In long-standing relationships there is probably no logic in starting to use condoms after appearance of the warts, as it is likely that both partners will already be carrying the virus. The average length of time between acquiring HPV and developing visible warts is 3 months, but can take many years. For example, many pregnant women may notice warts for the very first time even although they acquired the virus several years previously. This is thought to be because pregnancy makes the body's immune system slightly less active and the wart virus may then cause visible warts to appear.

What are the long-term effects of Genital Wart Virus Infection?

With time, your body's immune system will suppress the virus, but probably never get rid of it completely. The vast majority of people with ordinary visible warts never have any problems at all. A tiny proportion of people carrying certain HPV strains (16/18/33) may develop pre-cancerous changes. This type of HPV infection does not usually cause visible warts. In women who are smokers or are HIV positive, this link may be a stronger one. Minor smear test changes are very common, occurring in 30% of women with genital warts. This will usually result in recommendation that you have more frequent smears for a while. Sometimes, you may be offered a further test called "colposcopy", which is simply a way of looking at the cervix more closely through a magnifying instrument. This test gives additional information to the smear test, takes only about 10-15 minutes and is quite painless. There is no need for women with genital warts to have smear tests any more often than at the usual 3 yearly interval, provided that their smears are always normal. In summary, therefore:

- many people have wart virus infection
- only a small proportion of people with the infection develop visible warts
- a sexual health check-up is a good idea for anyone with warts, or their partner
- GU Medicine departments have a wide range of treatments available and can offer free, confidential advice about any matter concerning your sexual health.