

Urologic Specialists of Virginia

What are Genital Warts?

Genital warts are flesh-colored or gray growths found in the genital area and anal region in both men and women. It is the most common sexually transmitted disease caused by a virus. The warts are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). Infection with genital warts may not be obvious.

What are the symptoms of Genital Warts?

Although genital warts are painless, they may be bothersome because of their location, size or due to itching. The size may range from less than 1 millimeter across to several square centimeters when many warts join together. Men and women with genital warts will often complain of painless bumps, itching, and discharge.

In men, genital warts can infect the urethra, penis, scrotum, and rectal area. The warts can appear as soft, raised masses with a surface that can be smooth (on the penile shaft) or rough with many fingerlike projections (anal warts). Others may appear pearly, cauliflower-like, or rough with a slightly dark surface. Most lesions are raised, but some may be flat with only slight elevation above the skin surface.

In women, genital warts have a similar appearance and usually occur in the moist areas of the labia minora and vaginal opening. Lesions visible on the outer genitals require a thorough examination of the vaginal canal, cervix, and anorectal area. Most vaginal warts occur without symptoms. Rarely, women may experience bleeding after sexual intercourse, itching, or vaginal discharge.

How can I prevent Genital Warts?

Because no treatment is 100% effective, it is important to prevent the spread of HPV, which causes genital warts, and its cancer-causing effects whenever possible. Transmission of genital warts can be decreased if you use condoms and refrain from sexual activity until therapy is completed.

Are there Medications for treating Genital Warts?

Several medications exist for treating genital warts and can be used as an alternative to other treatments. These medications include:

- Podophyllum– Topically applied by a doctor
- Podofilox (Condylox) - Can be topically applied at home, higher cure rates than Podophyllum resin and is useful for prevention. Condylox should be applied twice daily for 3 consecutive days, then discontinue for 4 consecutive days. This

one week cycle of treatment may be repeated until there is no visible wart tissue for a maximum of 4 weeks.

- Trichloroacetic acid – Topically applied, response is often incomplete and recurrence is higher, may cause pain and burning
- 5-Fluorouracil (Efudex) – Applied as a cream, long treatment time, can cause burning and irritation, many side effects
- Interferon alpha-n3 (Alferon N) – Used as an injection for warts that do not respond to other therapies, many side effects
- Imiquimod (Aldara) – Aldara Cream is to be applied 3 times per week, prior to normal sleeping hours, and left on the skin for 6-10 hours. Patients should be instructed to apply Aldara Cream to external genital/perianal warts. A thin layer is applied to the wart area and rubbed in until the cream is no longer visible. The application site is not to be occluded. Following the treatment period cream should be removed by washing the treated area with mild soap and water.

What Other Treatments are available for Genital Warts?

No single treatment is effective in eliminating warts and preventing them from coming back. Genital warts may go away on their own in about 10-20% of people over a period of 3-4 months.

- Cryotherapy: This technique freezes the wart using liquid nitrogen or a "cryoprobe." It is an excellent first-line treatment because response rates are high with few side effects.
- Laser treatment: This treatment is used for extensive or recurrent genital warts. It may require local, regional, or general anesthesia. The laser physically destroys the HPV lesion. Disadvantages include high cost, increased healing time, scarring, and potentially infectious viral particles in the air caused by the laser plume.
- Electrodesiccation: This technique uses an electric current to destroy the warts. It can be done in the office with local anesthesia. The resulting smoke plume may be infectious.
- Surgical Removal-This is rarely performed unless the warts are too extensive for less invasive treatments.