

Genital Wart Disease/Human Papilloma Virus Infection

Human papilloma viral (HPV) infections of the skin and mucosal membranes are caused by a family of viruses. So far, there are more than 60 strains of HPV. The different strains can cause different types of lesions. For instance, one type causes plantar warts on the feet. Another type causes small, flat warts on the face or legs. Yet another can cause tumors on the vocal cords.

Many strains appear to be present in warts that occur in the genital area.

Here are a few basic facts about genital warts:

- Most but not all infections are sexually acquired.
- Spread of a wart from the hand to the genitalia is uncommon but can occur.
- The length of time between infection and an outbreak can vary from weeks to months to years.
- If a person has HPV, a single contact can cause infection 60 percent of the time.
- People who have had multiple sexual partners over a time probably have the virus.
- Two of every three sexually active adults are probably infected with HPV.
- 70 percent of those who have the virus do not show any signs of infection. That is, they have no outbreak of warts.
- Females who have the infection, even those who do not have a wart outbreak, are at risk of developing cancer, especially in the cervix. These cancers can be diagnosed, prevented or cured early in development. The goal of treatment of female patients should be to prevent such cancers. A pap smear is helpful but women who are known to have particular strains of HPV should speak with their gynecologists about additional means of examination.
- Males who have condylomata accuminata (venereal warts) have very low risk of penile cancer.
- No strain of HPV is known to cause cancer. Cancer is developed when there are other contributing factors, such as smoking, sexual microtrauma, poor hygiene or immunosuppression.
- Visible warts should be treated because they can be painful, but no therapy is likely to eliminate the virus. Only through the strengthening of the immune system can it be fully eliminated over time.
- Pregnancy is likely to enhance HPV growth. Birth control pills also may have the same effect.
- Vaginal delivery of a baby from a mother with HPV infection can put the baby at risk for papilloma infection in the throat, but this is so unlikely that caesarean section delivery is rarely necessary to avoid it.
- Infection of other members of the household is not a serious problem with anogenital warts, unlike warts which appear on other parts of the body.
- In couples who have a monogamous sexual relationship, both partners are likely to have similar strains of the virus, so no protection against cross-infection is necessary.

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