

WARTS & VERRUCAES

Warts are flesh coloured areas of raised, rough and hardened skin. They are caused by a virus called the human papilloma virus. The virus causes a tough shell of abnormal skin cells to be produced as it replicates. A wart on the sole of the foot is called a verruca. Genital warts are sexually transmitted warts found on the genitals and around the rectum.

Warts are usually harmless, but they can look unattractive. They often clear up by themselves, although treatment can help to get rid of them more quickly. Warts are not normally painful, although verrucas can sometimes hurt.

People with weak immune systems (the part of the body that fights infection) are more likely to get warts. This is because the body is less able to fight off the HPV virus.

Symptoms

Warts can be different sizes, ranging from 1mm to over 1cm. You may have only one or two warts, or lots can develop on the same area of skin.

The size and shape of warts varies:

- Common wart (*verruca vulgaris*) is a firm, raised wart with a rough surface that can look a bit like a cauliflower. They can occur anywhere, but are most common on the knuckles, knees and fingers.
- Plane wart (*verruca plana*) is a round, flat-topped, yellowish type of wart. They mainly occur on the back of the hands, especially around the nails and fingers.
- Filiform wart (*verruca filiformis*) is a long, slender wart that is common on the thin skin of the eyelids, armpits or neck.
- Genital warts (*condylomata acuminata*) can be small, white lumps or larger, cauliflower-shaped growths on the penis, scrotum or vulva (the female external sex organs), or around the rectum. Warts can also develop inside the vagina or anus.
- Verrucas (planter warts) are warts on the soles of the feet. Verrucas do not stick up from the surface of the skin. Instead, the weight of the body pushing down on them makes them grow back into the skin, which can be painful. Verrucas often have a black dot in the centre (blood supply); surrounded by a hard, white area.

Causes

Warts are caused by different strains of the human papilloma virus (HPV). The virus is present in the skin cells of a wart, and can be passed on through close skin-to-skin contact. You are more likely to catch the infection if your skin is damaged, or if it is wet or in contact with rough surfaces. Swimming pools are a common place to catch verrucas.

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Treatment

Most warts clear up without treatment, although this can take up to two years. There are treatment options available that may be able to clear warts faster, although some types of treatment can be painful, and there is no guarantee that the warts will not come back again.

Treatment options depend on where the warts are and how many there are. It is best to treat a wart or verruca early as the older the wart the more resistant it becomes to treatment. Treatments from your pharmacy include:

- Over-the-counter treatments - a variety of creams, gels, paints and medicated plasters are available from pharmacies. Most of these contain chemicals such as salicylic acid, formaldehyde as their active ingredient and can take up to 3 months of continuous treatment to get rid of warts (eg) Duofilm[®], Salactol[®]
- Whelehans and many pharmacies now sell treatments to freeze the wart and generally one treatment will get rid of the wart or verruca (eg) Wartner[®], Scholl Freeze[®].

Warts that fail to clear up with over the counter treatments will need to be treated by your GP. Treatment options include:

- Cryotherapy - very cold liquid nitrogen is sprayed onto the wart to freeze and destroy the cells. This is generally done in a GP's surgery.
- Surgery to remove warts is carried out under general or local anaesthetic. Other surgical options are laser treatment, in which the wart is destroyed using a very precise laser beam, and electrocautery, in which the wart is burnt off using an electric current.

Genital warts must be treated by your GP as over the counter products cannot be used. It usually takes several weeks to clear genital warts and can sometimes take up to six months.

Prevention

- do not touch other people's warts,
- do not scratch or pick at a wart as this may spread the infection to other parts of your body,
- do not share towels, flannels or other personal items with a person who has a wart,
- do not share shoes or socks with someone who has a verruca, and wear flip-flops in communal showers and in swimming pool changing areas.