

WHAT ABOUT WARTS?

What causes them? Warts are small, non-cancerous growths of the skin. They are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). There are more than 50 types.

Where do they occur? They can appear anywhere on your body, including your face.

Who gets them? Warts are most frequent in children and young adults, but they also occur in people over age 40. To have your first episode of warts at, say, 60 is unusual. You may be more susceptible to warts if you take medication to suppress your immune system following a liver or kidney transplant operation or for treatment of some other disorder. Long-term steroid use also makes you susceptible.

How do you get them? You can acquire warts through person-to-person contact and indirectly from such places as a public shower floor. Warts can spread from one area of your body to another, on adjacent fingers of an already infected hand, for example. Genital warts are usually transmitted by sexual contact. Usually, warts are acquired and spread through breaks in your skin. The incubation period (the time from exposure to HPV until the wart appears) is about three months. But warts can lie dormant for years.

Are warts serious? The majority of warts are not a serious health hazard and may disappear without treatment. Certain types of HPV can be found in >50 percent of women with invasive cancer of the cervix. Some laryngeal warts have developed in infants due to passage through an infected vaginal canal at birth, or in an adult through oral-genital sex. These warts can become malignant.

What are the common types?

Common warts have a raised, rough surface and can appear anywhere on your body but most often on your hands.

Flat warts, smaller and smoother appear in cluster on the backs of your hands, face or legs.

Plantar warts appear on the bottom surface of your foot. They are flat, resemble calluses and are often painful.

Filiform warts form long, finger-like projections around your eyelids, face and neck.

Periungual warts occur mostly in nail biters and cuticle pickers and around the fingernails.

Genital warts appear in your perineum, genitalia, and anus.

How do you get rid of warts? Each person's immune system responds to warts differently, and each type of wart behaves differently. For some people, warts disappear on their own; these people may develop life-long immunity. You may get warts that multiply rapidly and even reappear after treatment. To prevent recurrence of a wart, your immune system must respond to the virus and keep it under control. Some common treatments:

Topical medications are available in the over-the-counter section at pharmacies. They contain salicylic acid that peels off the infected skin.

Liquid nitrogen freezes off warts. It is effective but your health care provider may need to repeat this treatment every two to four weeks.

Electrodesiccation with curettage (scraping) surgically removes the wart. It may leave a scar.

With plantar warts, especially, the scar may be as painful as the wart.

Lasers surgically vaporize wart tissue.