

Genital warts/HPV

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Genital warts (also called condyloma) are caused by virus, the human papilloma virus, abbreviated to HPV. HPV often has the appearance of warts and is spread through unprotected vaginal intercourse, anal sex and oral sex. It can also be spread through mutual masturbation and petting when skin is rubbed against skin. The symptoms are often mild, but the warts can be unpleasant.

SYMPTOMS OF GENITAL WARTS/HPV

You need not necessarily have any symptoms of HPV. If you do have symptoms, it takes between several weeks and several months for them to appear in the form of warts. The warts are most commonly found around and on the genitals. They can also be around the anus or the mouth of the urethra. They are either round and slightly raised or are gathered in clusters. The warts can be seen, but are sometimes difficult to detect. HPV can also cause itching, cracked skin with slight bleeding and a burning sensation around the genitals. Women may experience genital pain during intercourse. In rare cases HPV can occur in the mouth.

In some cases HPV can be latent in the body for months, up to about a year, before symptoms appear.

GETTING TESTED FOR GENITAL WARTS/HPV

There is no test to show that you have HPV. However, you can be examined by a specialist if you suspect that you have genital warts/HPV. This examination is not free.

TREATMENT

The HPV virus clears up, but it can take a long time. The warts may also disappear of their own accord. They can also be treated using a cream or a solution that is painted onto the warts. It's also possible to burn or freeze the warts to remove them. For treatment you must contact a doctor and the duration of the treatment varies depending on the method used.

As the virus may still be in the mucous membrane or on the skin, the warts may recur. Since there are several different strains of HPV, the warts may come back if you are infected again. You will then need to be treated again. This treatment is not free.

IMPORTANT POINTS ABOUT GENITAL WARTS/HPV

HPV does not affect your ability to have children, whether you are a woman or a man. During pregnancy a mother-to-be's warts may grow and more may appear, but they generally disappear after the birth. During birth there is a risk of the child being infected with HPV.

A condom offers good protection against the spread of genital warts. Of course, the condom has to cover the area of the skin where the warts are. You should tell your sexual partner if you have genital warts/HPV so that you can both protect yourselves.

HPV is caused by several different types of virus. Certain types of virus that don't necessarily produce visible warts can cause cell changes in the vagina in all women, regardless of sexual orientation. These cell changes can cause cervical cancer. This means that it's important that women undergo regular smear tests.

You can be vaccinated against certain types of HPV. This should preferably be done before you first become sexually active. The vaccine provides protection against the most common virus types that can produce warts and cause cancer. Even if you have been vaccinated, it's important to continue to undergo screening.

These texts were produced in 2009 by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare and the texts have been checked by HANS CARLBERG, consultant physician at Sösam, the Unit for Sexual Health at the Dermatology and Venereology Clinic, Södersjukhuset (Stockholm South General Hospital); HANS FREDLUND, Associate Professor and consultant in communicable diseases, Örebro County Council, Örebro University Hospital; LENA MARIONS, Associate Professor and consultant physician at the Gynaecology Clinic, Karolinska University Hospital.

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