Genital Warts

What are genital warts?

Genital warts are small, flesh-coloured or grey bumps that can appear in the genital or anal area. They are a common sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by certain strains of the human papillomavirus (HPV). They can appear as a single wart or as multiple warts in a cluster.

Symptoms

Many people with genital warts don't have any symptoms. If symptoms do occur, they might include:

- Small, flesh-coloured or grey swellings in your genital area.
- A cauliflower-like shape caused by several warts close together.
- Itching or discomfort in your genital area.
- Bleeding during or after sex.

Causes

Genital warts are usually spread through sexual contact, including vaginal, anal, and occasionally oral sex. They can also be spread by sharing sex toys. It's possible to get or spread HPV even if you or your partner can't see the warts. Warts may not appear until weeks or months after sexual contact with an infected person.

Diagnosis

If you have visible warts, a doctor can usually diagnose the condition by looking at the affected area. In some cases, a biopsy may be necessary to confirm the diagnosis. If there are no visible warts, but you suspect you have been exposed to HPV, your doctor may perform a Pap test or a HPV test to detect the presence of the virus.

Treatment

While there's no cure for the virus that causes genital warts, the warts themselves can be treated. Your doctor may prescribe a topical treatment that you apply directly to the warts, or they might remove the warts through methods like:

- Cryotherapy (freezing the warts off, usually with liquid nitrogen)
- Electrocautery (burning the warts off with an electrical current)
- Surgical removal.

Keep in mind that treatment doesn't guarantee the warts won't come back, or that you can't spread the virus to others.

Prevention

The best way to prevent genital warts is to practice safe sex. Here are a few steps you can take:

- Use condoms or dental dams every time you have sex. However, remember that they can't fully protect against HPV because the virus can infect areas that aren't covered by a condom.

- Get the HPV vaccine. It's recommended for boys and girls aged 12-13 in Australia, but adults can also benefit from it, especially if they didn't get it when they were younger.
- Regularly get checked for STIs, especially if you have multiple sexual partners or a new partner.

Long-term Health Effects

The types of HPV that cause genital warts are usually different from the types that can cause cancer. However, because HPV can cause other health problems, regular check-ups are important.

Remember, your GP is your partner in health. If you have any concerns, or if you notice any changes in your body, don't hesitate to reach out to your doctor.

This information is intended for general informational purposes and should not be used as a substitute for professional medical advice. If you have any health concerns, please see your healthcare provider.

Last updated: May 2023

Copyright © Jimmy Tseng 2023