

## Genital Warts

Genital warts, or condyloma acuminatum, are growths in or around the vagina, penis, or rectum and are caused by infection with sexually transmitted papilloma viruses.

Genital warts are common. In the United States an estimated 500,000 people per year develop genital warts. Approximately 20 to 45% of sexually active women have been infected with one of the viruses that causes these warts. Because of the location of these warts, condoms may not protect against infection. Recently there has been made available a vaccine which may help prevent infection with certain types of papillomavirus and is indicated for sexually active women or those of childbearing age.

There are a large number of papillomaviruses, some of which cause genital warts and others which cause common warts on other parts of the body. Additionally, not all types cause plainly visible external lesions. For example, some types cause tiny raised areas on the cervix that may only be visible with a magnifying instrument called a colposcope.

Many people have no symptoms of genital warts, but some feel occasional burning pain. The warts usually appear 1 to 6 months after infection with papillomavirus, beginning as tiny, soft, moist, pink or red swellings. They grow rapidly and appear as rough, irregular bumps, which sometimes grow out from the skin on narrow stalks. Groups of warts often grow in the same area, and their rough surfaces give them the appearance of a small cauliflower. Genital warts can progress rapidly in pregnant women, those with impaired immune systems (including HIV infection) and those who have inflammation of the skin. Whether symptomatic or not, genital warts may increase the risk of developing cancer (especially cervical cancer in females) and therefore should be treated.

Genital warts usually can be diagnosed from their appearance. Unusual-looking or persistent warts may be removed surgically and examined under a microscope to make sure that they are not cancerous. Regular Papanicolaou (Pap) tests to detect the early stages of cancer are very important in women who have warts on the cervix. An anal pap test is also available and may an important screening tool for anal cancer in high risk populations (such as men who engage in receptive anal intercourse with other men.)

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