

## **Genital Warts**

### **Introduction:**

Genital warts are caused by a common virus called Human papillomavirus (HPV). There are many different types of HPV, and some of these particularly affect the genital region. Infection with certain 'low risk' types of HPV can cause genital warts. The 'low risk' HPV types that cause most cases of genital warts are different to the 'high risk' HPV types than can lead to cervical cancer.

Genital HPV types are easily spread during most types of sexual activity. The 'low-risk' types HPV 6 and HPV 11 are responsible for most genital warts, which can affect both males and females.

HPV can cause abnormal changes to the cells of infected skin. In most cases, the body fights off HPV naturally, and the infected cells go back to normal. But in some cases, the body cannot fight off the infection, and genital warts can occur.

### **What is it and what are the symptoms?**

Genital warts usually appear as a small bump or groups of bumps in the genital area. They can be different sizes, raised or flat, or shaped like a cauliflower. Genital warts are often painless, but some patients may have itching, burning, or discomfort.

Most HPV infections do not cause any symptoms, so you won't always know you have it. This means that you may be carrying HPV in an area of your skin, even though you do not have any visible signs.

Following sexual contact with an infected person, genital warts may appear within weeks or months, even if the infected person has no signs of genital warts. Genital warts can be removed by the patient with medications, or by a healthcare professional. However, as treatment only removes the visible wart, not the virus (HPV), genital warts can come back. If left untreated, genital warts might go away, remain unchanged, or increase in size or number.

### **How is it spread?**

Genital HPV types are easily spread through direct, skin-to-skin contact, during most types of sexual activity with a person who has the virus. Infection may occur after direct contact with a visible wart. The virus can also be spread by an infected person who has no signs or symptoms.

You can help reduce the risk of spreading the HPV infection that causes genital warts by treating the warts as soon as they appear. Condoms may also help, but condoms do not fully protect against HPV.

Please speak to your doctor if you are concerned about your risk of HPV or genital warts.

## **Who is at risk?**

Anyone who has had any kind of sexual activity could get HPV. Between 50-80% of sexually active people will have had genital HPV infection at some time in their lives. Most infections clear on their own. Two of these genital HPV types (HPV 6 and 11, known as 'low risk' HPV types) are the cause of most cases of genital warts.

If you have any concerns regarding HPV infection, please speak to your doctor regarding your individual circumstances.

## **Vaccine Recommendations**

As HPV is most commonly spread by sexual contact, funded vaccination is given to females before they become sexually active to help prevent initial infection with the HPV types included in the vaccine.

HPV vaccination is available free to 12-13 year old girls in the first year of secondary school. HPV vaccination is recommended to provide protection against cervical disease. However, the current HPV vaccine used for the government funded school program for 12-13 year old girls also provides some protection against genital warts.

However, all sexually active women remain at risk of being infected with HPV, and vaccination may be suggested by your doctor. Please discuss your individual circumstances with him/her.

HPV vaccination is available for adult women (women up to 45 years of age), but is not funded by the government. If protection against genital warts is important to you, or you have any questions, please discuss this with your doctor.

HPV vaccination involves 3 injections, usually given over a 6-month period. It is important that all three injections are received to help protect against HPV infection.

Males are also at risk of HPV infection. Vaccination against HPV is not currently government funded for males. Please discuss any specific questions or concerns with your doctor.

Other individuals may also be at risk of HPV. Please discuss your individual circumstances with your doctor.

A range of side effects may be experienced following vaccination. Discuss any concerns you have with your healthcare professional and inform them if you, or a member of your family experience any side effects as you may need treatment.

## **Important Information:**

HPV vaccination does not protect against all types of HPV. Speak to your doctor about how to help protect yourself against HPV infection. Your doctor will advise whether HPV vaccination is appropriate for you.

For further information on HPV or genital warts please speak to your doctor.

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