

Sexually Transmitted Diseases/Infections

Genital Warts

Genital human papillomavirus (also called HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI). Most people with HPV do not develop symptoms or health problems from it. In 90 percent of cases, the body's immune system clears HPV naturally within two years. But sometimes, certain types of HPV can cause genital warts in males and females.

Genital warts usually appear as a small bump or groups of bumps in the genital area. They can be small or large, raised or flat, or shaped like a cauliflower. Genital warts are usually asymptomatic, but depending on the size and anatomic location, they can be painful or pruritic. Warts can appear within weeks or months after sexual contact with an infected partner — even if the infected partner has no signs of genital warts. If left untreated, genital warts might go away, remain unchanged, or increase in size or number. They will not turn into cancer.

Diagnosis of genital warts is usually clinical and made by visual inspection. Genital warts can be confirmed by biopsy, which might be indicated if 1) the diagnosis is uncertain; 2) the lesions do not respond to standard therapy; 3) the disease worsens during therapy; 4) the lesion is atypical; 5) the patient has compromised immunity; or 6) the warts are pigmented, indurated, fixed, bleeding, or ulcerated. The primary reason for treating genital warts is the amelioration of symptoms (including relieving cosmetic concerns) and ultimately, removal of the warts. If left untreated, visible genital warts can resolve on their own, remain unchanged, or increase in size or number. Treatment of genital warts should be guided by the preference of the patient, available resources, and the experience of the health-care provider. No definitive evidence suggests that any of the available treatments are superior to any other, and no single treatment is ideal for all patients or all warts.

This common infection is not reportable under the current N.C. Administrative Code.

For more information:

- CDC HPV topic site, www.cdc.gov/hpv
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- CDC – What is HPV? www.cdc.gov/hpv/WhatIsHPV.html
- CDC STD Treatment Guidelines 2010 – Genital Warts, www.cdc.gov/std/treatment/2010/genital-warts.htm