

# WARTS/HUMAN PAPILLOMA VIRUS – PATIENT HANDOUT

## What causes this infection?

Genital (and anal warts) are caused by several types of Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). There are over 100 different types of HPV affecting different parts of the body. About 40 affect the genitals. HPV infections in the genital area are very common. What are the symptoms?

Many people will have genital HPV at some time in their life and not know it. The body's immune system usually clears the virus in one to two years.

Other people may have:

- ♦ Visible warts anywhere on the genital or anal area;
- ♦ a subclinical infection where no warts are visible but tiny changes to cells show that the virus is present (usually on a Pap smear or biopsy);
- ♦ a latent infection where the virus is only detectable using laboratory techniques reserved for research purposes.

## How does someone get infected?

The HPV virus which causes genital warts is passed on during skin-to-skin contact, usually during sexual activity.

## What is the treatment?

Because this infection is caused by a virus, treatments can only remove the warts or the infected cells. They won't always get rid of the virus.

Warts can be removed by:

- ♦ using a medication on the skin such as imiquimod or podophyllotoxin)
- ♦ freezing
- ♦ burning
- ♦ laser.

Recurrences are common after any form of treatment. Changes on a woman's cervix, found as the result of a Pap smear, are also sometimes treated. The doctor or nurse will discuss which treatment is best for you.

## Does HPV cause cancer?

Some of the viruses that cause genital warts can also cause abnormal cell changes on the cervix, penis or anus. However, only a few of these viruses are strongly linked with cancer. They seem to act together with other factors, one of which is smoking. Visible warts are less likely to lead to cell changes that can cause cancer.

## Can this infection be passed on to a sexual partner?

Visible warts can be transmitted sexually. The subclinical infection, where no warts are visible, may also be transmitted sexually, although less is known about this. People in a regular sexual relationships who haven't been using condoms may wish to discuss with their partner and/or the doctor or nurse if they need to start using condoms. Condoms will offer some protection; but they don't cover all of the genital skin.

## If you're being treated for genital warts:

- ♦ While having treatment for visible warts, keep the area clean and dry by bathing in salty water and drying the area well – once a day is enough.
- ♦ Regular sexual partners may choose to have a check-up to see if they have warts.
- ♦ Talk to a counsellor, nurse or doctor if you're not sure how to discuss genital warts with regular partners.
- ♦ Reduce or stop smoking. Smoking seems to be associated with warts either not responding to treatment or recurring more often.
- ♦ Have regular Pap smears. The doctor or nurse will discuss when you should have your next Pap smear.
- ♦ Always use condoms with new or casual partners – this will help protect from getting other sexually transmissible infections (STIs).