

WARTS

What is it?

Warts are painless, fleshy growths on the skin which are caused by human papilloma viruses. These lesions may be flat or raised and cauliflower-like interrupting the normal skin lines with their growth pattern. There are over 100 subtypes of human papilloma viruses and many are site specific, meaning they will only be manifested in certain areas such as the palms of the hands, soles of the feet or the genitals. Genital warts are discussed in more detail in another handout. Warts on the skin are extremely common and generally a cosmetic, not a medical problem.

How is it spread?

Human papilloma viruses are much too small to be seen and these viruses may be present on skin without any visible warts. Our immune systems eventually recognize these viruses and learn to fight them off as our bodies mature, making children and young adults more vulnerable to these infections. The viruses are spread by direct contact with infected skin or possibly by exposure to an object or surface that had recent contact with viral particles. Broken skin or overly dry or wet skin is more vulnerable to infection. The incubation period of the virus is two to six months after exposure. People do not often know they have the virus, which increases the ease of transmission.

How is it treated?

Most warts will resolve within two years with no treatment. Often getting the correct diagnosis is more important to people than treatment, as treatment can decrease the size and number of warts but does not eradicate the virus. Unsightly or uncomfortable warts can be treated in a number of different ways either by a medical provider or by patients on their own. Studies have found varying levels of effectiveness with different treatments but agree that treatment choices should begin with options that have the least likelihood to cause pain or scarring. People with immune deficiency diseases or inability to feel sensation on their skin should consult a medical provider for treatment, as should anyone who is uncertain of the diagnosis or best treatment plan.

Medications made from salicylic acid are used for treatment of warts and can be purchased inexpensively without a prescription. Different strengths and formulations are available that are more appropriate for various parts of the body. For instance, plasters or patches work better on the soles of the feet than would a liquid. All products have specific instructions that should be followed to improve effectiveness and decrease excess damage to the skin.

Topical medication is usually applied at night time. Prior to applying any medication, it is optimal to soften the skin by soaking in warm water for 10-20 minutes. Then, the warty growth is pared down with a pumice stone, nail file or emery board to remove the surface callused (thickened) area. Then a medicated substance is applied which causes the treated area to eventually slough off (blister and peel) and new skin to grow. When the skin is blistered and raw tissue is present, it is important to guard against bacterial contamination and infection. Apply bacitracin or Polysporin antibacterial ointment to the area and cover with a bandage to keep it clean and dry.

This process usually needs to be repeated several times to eradicate the seed of the wart which is deep in the skin layers. Progress should be noticeable in a couple weeks. Treatments may continue for a week or two after the wart is no longer noticeable to insure more complete resolution.

Many people have heard of recent studies using Duct Tape to get rid of warts. Essentially, a piece of silver Duct tape is applied to the warty area and left on for six days. Upon removal of the tape, the area is soaked and pared with a pumice stone or nail file and the Duct Tape reapplied the following day. This procedure may be repeated over a two month period if success is seen by the third week. This method has been shown to be even more effective than freezing done in a medical setting.

Treatments at a medical provider's office similarly involve the removal of superficial callused skin and application of an acid solution or by freezing or burning the warty tissue. One to two weeks later the same procedure is repeated, or the patient may begin one of the home treatments after initial freezing or burning. In some cases, the warts are resistant to standard treatment or are so extensive that other options are considered.

Prevention

Eliminating exposure to the wart virus is nearly impossible. Decreasing exposure is suggested by avoiding exposure to known warts and not spreading them further on your body by shaving or picking at them. To avoid warts on the feet, wear shower slippers in public showers and shoes in other public places to decrease potential exposure.

In general, avoid sharing towels, wash clothes, and razors with other people. Avoiding overly dry skin and covering open wounds should help protect your skin from contracting warts. Complete avoidance is not possible as this virus is ubiquitous in society and our immune systems are capable of fighting it off.