

Genital warts

Genital warts are the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI). They are passed on through vaginal, anal and oral sex. But it is rare in the case of oral sex.

Treatment from a sexual health clinic can help them go away.

Symptoms of genital warts

Go to a sexual health clinic or see your GP if

you have any of the following symptoms:

- 1 or more painless growths or lumps around your vagina, penis or bottom
- itching or bleeding from your genitals or bottom
- a change to your normal flow of pee (for example, sideways) that does not go away
- a sexual partner who has genital warts, even if you have no symptoms

Treatment can help to get rid of warts and prevent the infection being passed on.

[Sexual health clinics in your area - sexualwellbeing.ie](https://sexualwellbeing.ie)

Causes of genital warts

Genital warts are caused by a virus called [human papillomavirus \(HPV\)](#). There are many types of HPV.

Genital warts are very common in people who are immunosuppressed (weak immune system).

You can get genital warts from:

- skin-to-skin contact, including vaginal and anal sex
- sharing sex toys
- oral sex - but this is rare

HPV can also be passed to a baby from the mother during birth, but this is rare.

You cannot get genital warts from:

- kissing
- things like towels, cutlery, cups or toilet seats

Diagnosing genital warts

Your GP will probably refer you to a sexual health clinic if they think you might have genital warts.

Sexual health clinics treat problems with the genitals and urinary system.

Many sexual health clinics offer a walk-in service where you do not need an appointment.

What happens at a sexual health clinic

A doctor or nurse can usually diagnose warts by looking at them.

They will:

- ask you about your symptoms and sexual partners
- look closely at the lumps around your genitals and bottom
- possibly need to look inside your vagina, bottom or urethra (where pee comes out) depending on where your warts are

It's not possible to find out who you got genital warts from or how long you've had the infection.

Treating genital warts

Treatment for genital warts needs to be prescribed by a doctor.

The type of treatment depends on what your warts are like.

Sometimes genital warts go away on their own without treatment. But most people prefer to get them treated.

Treatments may take a few weeks or months to work.

Sometimes warts come back after treatment.

Treatments include:

- cream or liquid - you can usually apply this to the warts yourself
- surgery - a doctor or nurse can cut, burn or laser the warts off
- freezing - a doctor or nurse freezes the warts, usually every week for 4 weeks

It may take weeks or months for treatment to work and the warts may come back. The treatment does not work for some people.

There's no cure for genital warts. But it's possible for your body to clear the virus over time.

Do

- ✓ tell the doctor or nurse if you're pregnant or thinking of becoming pregnant - some treatments will not be suitable
- ✓ avoid perfumed soaps or bubble baths during treatment as these can irritate the skin
- ✓ ask the doctor or nurse if your cream treatment will affect [condoms, diaphragms or caps](#)

Don't

- ✗ do not use wart treatment from a pharmacy – these are not made for genital warts
- ✗ [do not smoke](#) – many treatments for genital warts work better if you do not smoke
- ✗ do not have vaginal, anal or oral sex until the warts have gone – if you do, use a condom

How genital warts are spread

The genital warts virus can be passed on whether or not there are visible warts.

Many people with the virus do not have symptoms but can still pass it on. If you have genital warts, your current sexual partners should get tested as they may have warts and not know it.

If symptoms do appear, it can happen over a year after infection.

Preventing the spread of genital warts

You can prevent spreading warts by:

- using a condom every time you have vaginal, anal or oral sex
- not having sex while you're having treatment for genital warts

If the virus is present in skin not protected by a condom, it can still be passed on.

[Find out more about condoms - sexualwellbeing.ie](#)

Why genital warts come back

The HPV virus can stay in your skin and warts can develop again.

Warts may go away without treatment but this can take many months. You can still pass the virus on,

and the warts may come back.

Genital warts and cancer

Genital warts are not cancer and do not cause cancer.

The HPV vaccine is offered to children in their first year of secondary school. The vaccine protects against cervical cancer as well as genital warts.

[Find out more about the HPV vaccination programme in schools](#)

Genital warts and pregnancy

Tell your midwife or doctor if you're pregnant and you have genital warts or think you have genital warts

During pregnancy, genital warts:

- can grow and multiply
- might appear for the first time, or come back after a long time of not being there
- can be treated safely, but some treatments should be avoided
- may be removed if they're very big, to avoid problems during birth
- may be passed to the baby during birth, but this is rare – the virus can cause infection in the baby's throat or genitals

Most pregnant women with genital warts have a vaginal delivery. You might be offered a [caesarean](#) depending on your circumstances. A caesarean section, or C-section, is an operation to deliver your baby through a cut made in your tummy and womb.

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