



This fact sheet uses standard medical terms (such as “vagina,” “breast,” and “penis”), but we recognize and respect that people use different words for their bodies.

GENITAL WARTS and Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

What are Genital Warts?

Genital warts are bumps that are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV).

What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the name of a group of viruses that includes more than 200 different strains or types. Some types of HPV are sexually transmitted, and HPV is the most common sexually transmitted and blood borne infection (STBBI) in Canada. Up to 75 per cent of people will come in contact with this virus during their life. Many people can clear the infection within two years.

The types of HPV virus are grouped according to their link with cancer. Infections with "low risk" HPV viruses cause genital warts. "High-risk" types of the HPV virus that do not go away can lead to cancer of the cervix, anus, throat, penis and vulva. HPV types that cause genital warts are unlikely to cause cancer.

How does someone get HPV?

- HPV is transmitted by skin-to skin contact, often through sexual activity including during vaginal, anal and oral sex.

What are the symptoms?

There are usually no symptoms and people may not know they have HPV. People with HPV infection who do not have symptoms can still pass the infection to their sexual partners. If symptoms develop, it may take 2 to 3 months, or even years for them to appear. HPV can cause warts in the genital area. They can:

- look like common skin warts and usually appear as soft or hard skin bumps. They can be raised or flat, single or multiple.
- have a cauliflower-like appearance and may range in colour from pink, skin-coloured, white, brown, or grey.

How does someone get tested?

A healthcare provider can look at your skin for genital warts. For people with a cervix, having regular cervical cancer screening can detect the virus on the cervix. There is currently no routine diagnostic test for other HPV related cancers in Canada.

How is it treated?

Treatments are available to remove warts and may reduce the risk of giving it to sexual partners. More than one treatment may be required before all the warts are gone. Treatments may be different depending on the number and location of the warts.

Some common treatments available include:

- Cryotherapy, a procedure which freezes the warts with liquid nitrogen.
- Topical medications applied directly to the warts.
- Topical take-home treatments are available by prescription
- Laser treatment or minor surgery, which are often used to treat the cervix or other internal warts.

*Over-the-counter wart treatments should never be used in the genital area.

How is it prevented?

- An HPV vaccine is the best way to protect against the most common strains of HPV. This vaccine is offered for free to all Ontario students in grade 7 and to certain groups based on their risk factors. Others can get a prescription for the vaccine by a healthcare provider. There is a fee for this vaccine, but it may be covered by some private insurances.
- Condoms can help prevent the spread of HPV, but they do not provide full protection.
- For individuals with a cervix, getting cervical screening regularly can help find abnormal cells, allowing healthcare providers to treat them before cancer develops.

For more information:

- Call the Sexual Health Infoline Ontario at 1-800-668-2437
- Order free HIV/STI testing: www.getakit.ca
- Contraception Information: www.itsaplan.ca
- Contact Us - Sexual Health Clinic:
[Sexual Health Clinic - Ottawa Public Health](#)
179 Clarence Street, Ottawa
613-234-4641
TTY: 613-580-9656

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