

## What are genital warts?

Genital warts are small, skin-coloured lumps that can appear on or around the genital and anal areas. They are caused by certain types of a virus called the Human Papillomavirus (HPV), particularly HPV types 6 and 11. These types are different from the ones which can cause cervical cancer.

Genital warts are not dangerous, but they can be uncomfortable, itchy, and can make people feel upset.

## How do you get genital warts?

Genital warts are spread through skin-to-skin contact, usually during vaginal, anal, or oral sex with an infected person.

You can catch HPV even if you can't see any warts, and condoms do not fully protect against the virus because the virus can infect areas that the condom does not cover.

Anyone who is sexually active can get genital warts. The risk is higher if you:

- have sex with multiple partners
- have a weak immune system (for example, because of HIV or certain medicines)
- smoke, which can make it harder for your body to fight off HPV

## What are the symptoms of genital warts?

Genital warts can look different from person to person. Some common signs are:

- small bumps that can be soft, flat, or cauliflower-shaped
- warts that show up alone or in clusters (groups)
- itching, irritation, or discomfort around the genital or anal area
- bleeding during sex (this is rare)

Genital warts can show up weeks, months, or even years after catching HPV. Because of this, it is often difficult to know when or from whom the virus was caught.

## How are genital warts diagnosed?

A doctor or healthcare provider can usually tell you if you have genital warts by checking the affected area. Sometimes extra tests are needed, especially if the warts are inside the vagina or anus.

## How are genital warts treated?

There are different ways to treat genital warts:

- **topical treatments:** creams or ointments - you apply these prescription medicine to the warts.
- **cryotherapy (freezing):** a healthcare provider freezes the warts with liquid nitrogen to remove the warts

Other treatments (less common) include:

- **electrocautery or laser therapy:** burning or using a laser to remove warts
- **surgery:** removing larger or stubborn warts

Even after treatment, warts can come back because the virus might still be in the body. However, most people's bodies get rid of the virus naturally over time.

If you have warts, avoid shaving or waxing the area.

## How do I prevent genital warts?

The best ways to prevent genital warts is through vaccination and safer sex practices:

- **HPV Vaccine (Gardasil 9):** protects against HPV types 6 and 11, which cause most genital warts and some cancers - it's free for people aged 12-25 under the National Immunisation Program
- **using condoms:** lowers the risk of getting or spreading HPV - however, wearing a condom does not give full protection
- **not smoking:** helps your immune system fight off HPV better



### Am I more likely to get cervical cancer if I have genital warts?

HPV can also infect the cervix. Some types of HPV can cause changes to cervical cells which might become cancer over time. But the types of HPV that cause genital warts are different – they do not cause cervical cancer.

If you have genital warts, you do not need extra cervical screening tests. You can ask your doctor or nurse when you need to have your next cervical screening (like a Pap test).

### When should I see a doctor?

You should see a doctor or visit a sexual health clinic if you:

- notice any unusual lumps, bumps, or warts around your genital area
- have pain, discomfort, or itching that doesn't go away
- see a skin change that worries you
- are worried or have questions

### Summary

Genital warts are common and can be treated. They are not dangerous, but they can be annoying and upsetting. The best ways to protect yourself is to get vaccinated, to practice safer sex, and to have regular check-ups. If you're worried or have questions, speak to a doctor or visit a sexual health clinic.

### For more information

- Visit your nearest Family Planning Australia clinic [fpnsw.org.au/clinics](https://fpnsw.org.au/clinics)
- Chat to a nurse via Talkline – 1300 658 886 or [fpnsw.org.au/talkline](https://fpnsw.org.au/talkline)
- National Relay Service (for people who are d/Deaf, hard of hearing or have speech communication difficulties) – 133 677
- Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) – 131 450
- NSW Sexual Health Infolink – [www.shil.nsw.gov.au](https://www.shil.nsw.gov.au) or 1800 451 624
- Let Them Know – [www.letthemknow.org.au](https://www.letthemknow.org.au)