

WARTS

Warts are viral infections of the skin, which is caused by the *Human papilloma virus*. The skin cells multiply rapidly and form an outgrowth. There are more than 150 types of warts.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WARTS

AGE

Warts occur in both children and adult. They are commoner in children especially between the ages of 12 – 16 years old. The higher incidence might be due to higher exposure to the virus in schools and sports facilities. They may occur at the age of 40 but to have your first episode of warts after the age of 60 is unusual. See a doctor for a proper diagnosis.

SPREAD

You can acquire through direct contact with people and indirectly from places such as the public shower floor. Warts can spread from one area of the body to another. Usually warts are spread and acquired through breaks in your skin or moist skin. Those who are on medication to suppress their immune system and on long-term steroid use are more prone to warts. A virus that is transferred from one person to another during sex causes *genital warts*.

APPEARANCE AND LOCATION

Common warts have a raised, rounded and rough surface. The lesions are usually flesh coloured or slightly darker than the skin. They can happen anywhere on your body but most often on your hands.

Plantar warts almost always appear on the soles of the feet.

THEY HAVE A DIFFERENT APPEARANCE TO WARTS ELSEWHERE ON THE BODY BECAUSE THE BODY'S WEIGHT PUSHES THE LESIONS INWARDS. THE PRESSURE EVENTUALLY PRODUCES PAIN WHEN WEIGHT IS APPLIED WHEN YOU STAND OR WALK.

Filiform warts form long, finger like projections around the eyelids, face and neck.

Periungual warts occur in the majority of nail biters and cuticle pickers. They appear under and around the fingernails.

Genital warts are soft, moist, painless, pink or brownish skin growths that crop up on the penis, lips of the vagina, anal area, and sometimes the cervix (the neck-like passageway between the uterus and vagina). Symptoms may include bleeding during a bowel movement or pain during urination.

WARTS CAN OCCUR SINGLY OR AS SEVERAL LESIONS. OCCASIONALLY, A CONSTELLATION OF WARTS MAY DEVELOP AROUND A CENTRAL WART.

DISTINGUISHING WARTS FROM OTHER AILMENTS

Warts have a network of capillaries. If pared blackened or bleeding points can be seen. This distinguishes warts from calluses and verrucae on the feet.

Calluses are hard, thickened skin on parts of the foot which is exposed to friction. Corns are caused by pressure on the skin from the inside, maybe from a bone. If a corn or callus is pared dark points will not be seen; instead layers of white keratin are present.

Malignant lesions are sometimes thought to be warts. There are 2 groups of skin cancer: pigmented or non-pigmented.

Pigmented lesions or moles can turn malignant. These can occur at a much younger age. Changes in appearance of pigmented lesions may warrant referral to a medical professional. This include:

- Increase in size
- Change of colour; especially to black
- Itching or bleeding
- Irregular wavy outline

Non-pigmented lesions are more likely to occur in the elderly. Signs might include a persistent small ulcer or sore, which progressively enlarges but never heals.

SELF CARE

- For some people warts disappear on their own in a period of 6 months to 2 years; these people may develop life long immunity. Warts may also multiply rapidly and even recur after treatment. This depends on the responses of each person's immune system to warts. The younger the patient, the more quickly the lesions are likely to remit.
- Continuous treatment of warts with over the counter preparations for several weeks is usually needed; sometimes up to 3 months may be required for the treatment to be successful.
- Referral is necessary if treatment has not been successful after 3 months.
- Apply a little pressure on the wart if it starts to bleed a little. Consult a doctor if bleeding does not stop.

- Do not cut or burn off a wart.
- For painful plantar warts, apply a doughnut shaped pad to cushion the wart and to relieve pain.
- If wart is in the way, use a pumice stone to scrape off the wart or use salicylic acid ointment.
- Discard both pumice stone that has been used and wart debris as they can be infectious.
- Do not use salicylic acid or irritate the wart if you have diabetes or peripheral vascular disease.
- Prior soaking of affected hand or foot in warm water for 5 – 10 minutes helps increase the action of salicylic acid.
- Occlusion of the wart using an adhesive plaster helps to keep the skin macerated, maximizing the effectiveness of salicylic acid.
- Protection of the surrounding skin is important while using salicylic acid ointment. This can be achieved by applying a layer of petroleum jelly to prevent the treatment from making contact with healthy skin.

CALL DOCTOR IF..

- Change in appearance of lesion – increase in size, colour change
- Bleeding occurs
- There is itching
- Infection occurs
- It is a painful plantar warts
- It is genital warts
- It is facial warts

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1. *Malaysia Healthcare Guide*, p.387. Malaysia: Medimedia Pacific Limited, 1996.
2. *Symptoms in the Pharmacy – A Guide To The Management of Common Illness*, Alisan Blenkinsopp and Paul Paxton: Blackwell Scientific Publication, London, 1989

Website:

- a) <http://www.aipm.healthy.net/>

Self Care Guide, Pharmaceutical Services Division, Ministry of Health Malaysia
http://www.pharmacy.gov.my/self_care_guide
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