Genital warts are the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI).

This leaflet gives you information about genital warts, advice on how to protect yourself and how to get treated.
What causes genital warts?
Genital warts are caused by a virus - known as the human papilloma virus (HPV). This is easily passed from one person to another through sexual contact. Anyone who is sexually active can get the virus. Both men and women can have HPV, and pass it on.

There are more than 100 different types of HPV. Different types can cause visible and invisible warts on the hands, feet or genital area.

This leaflet is about genital warts. Warts in the anal area are called anogenital warts. However, we use the term ‘genital warts’ to talk about warts in both the genital area and the anal area.

Most people will not have any symptoms, and will not develop visible warts, so you may not know whether you or your partner has the virus.

How are genital warts passed on?
Genital warts can be passed from one person to another during sex, and by skin-to-skin contact with someone who has the wart virus. Once you have the virus, it can remain in the body and be passed on before warts are noticeable, or after they've disappeared.

Warts can be external or internal. In women, warts can be found on or in the vagina, vulva (the lips around the opening to the vagina), cervix (entrance to the womb) and anus (the opening to the back passage). In men, warts can be found on or around the penis, scrotum and urethra (tube where urine comes out) and on or inside the anus.

The virus can spread if you have vaginal or anal sex, or share sex toys. Sometimes the virus can be passed on just by close intimate contact. It is
possible, but unusual, to develop warts in the mouth or on the lips from oral sex. Warts can spread to the area around the anus without having anal sex.

In rare cases, it is possible for a pregnant woman to pass the virus to her baby at birth.

You cannot get genital warts from kissing, hugging, sharing baths or towels, from swimming pools, toilet seats or from sharing cups, plates or cutlery.

**How can I protect myself from genital warts?**

Condoms provide the best protection against STIs but are not 100% effective. There is little research evidence to show how effective condoms are in protecting against getting – or passing on – genital warts. However, some people feel more comfortable using condoms for anal or vaginal sex when there are visible warts. They may prevent infection of new sexual partners.

- If you are not sure how to use condoms correctly, call FPA (see page 11) for a free leaflet about male and female condoms.
- If you're not happy with the condoms you have tried already, why not try a different brand or type? They come in a variety of shapes and sizes.
- Avoid sharing sex toys – if they are shared, wash them or cover them with a new condom before anyone else uses them.
- For oral sex, use a condom or a latex square (dental dam) to cover the warts. If you cannot cover them, avoid contact between the mouth and the warts.

These measures can also help to protect you from some other STIs such as HIV and chlamydia.
Condoms may help to prevent the spread of the virus if they are used for the first three months after the warts have gone.

**What are the signs and symptoms?**
Most people infected will not have any visible signs or symptoms at all. If you think you could have the virus then go for a check-up and encourage your partner to be checked too. Sexual health clinics don’t mind doing check-ups.

It can take from two weeks to several months or longer after coming into contact with the virus before warts may appear.

If you do get visible warts you might notice small, fleshy growths, bumps or skin changes which may appear anywhere in the genital or anal area – either externally on the skin or internally.

You might see or feel them, or your partner might notice them. They can be flat, smooth, small bumps or quite large, pink, cauliflower-like lumps. Warts can appear on their own or in groups. Often they are so tiny, or so difficult to see, that you don’t even know you have them.

Genital warts are usually painless. They may occasionally itch and cause some inflammation. They may cause bleeding from the anus or the urethra.

**How will I know if I have the virus?**
You won’t know unless you have a sexual health check. It is possible to get the virus by having sex with someone who is infected, but has not noticed any warts. Even if you or your partner notices warts, you should still have a sexual health check to confirm this. You may wish to have a check-up
particularly if:
* you have had unprotected sex with a new partner recently
* you or your partner has had unprotected sex with other partners
* during a vaginal examination your doctor or nurse notices warts on the vulva, cervix or wall of the vagina
* a sexual partner tells you they have an STI
* you are found to have another STI.

Don't delay seeking advice - clinics don't mind doing sexual health check-ups.

How soon after sex can I be checked for warts?
You can be checked as soon as you think you might have been in contact with the virus. Some people diagnosed with the virus won't develop visible warts straightaway, and you may be asked to come back for another examination.

You can go to a genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinic, a sexual health clinic or to your GP. If your GP doesn't offer sexual health checks, they will refer you to a clinic that does. A leaflet Sexually transmitted infections - where to go for help and advice is available free from fpa (see page 11).

You can have more than one STI at any one time, so ask about being tested for others.

What does the check-up involve?
In most cases, a doctor or nurse can tell if you have warts just by looking. You may also need an internal examination of the vagina or anus to see if there are any warts inside.

Occasionally, if warts are suspected but not obvious, the doctor or nurse may wipe a weak
solution of vinegar over the area they are looking at. This makes it turn white and easier to see. Sometimes a small sample (biopsy) is needed for closer examination. Depending on the area being examined, local anaesthetic may be used. The doctor may use a magnifying lens (called a colposcope) to find small warts.

A new type of cervical smear test is being researched which will offer a quicker way of diagnosing wart virus. It is not yet widely available in the UK.

There is no blood test for the wart virus.

What is the treatment for genital warts?
The aims of treatment are to remove visible genital warts and reduce the amount of virus, which should help your body to fight the infection. As genital warts are caused by a virus and not bacteria, antibiotics will not get rid of them. Visible warts can be removed by:

- painting a liquid chemical onto them. This is the most common treatment.
- using a liquid or cream at home
- freezing (cryotherapy)
- heat (electrocautery)
- surgery
- laser treatment
- injecting a drug directly into the wart, although this treatment is less common.

These treatments may be uncomfortable, but they should not be painful. Sometimes a local anaesthetic cream is used.

Treatments can cause irritation and soreness for a couple of days, so the doctor may prescribe painkillers if you need them during the healing