Warts and the cervix

Some types of the wart virus may be linked to changes in cervical cells which can lead to cancer. However, the types of wart virus which cause visible warts are only rarely the types associated with cervical cancer. Women who have genital warts should, like all women over the age of 20, have regular cervical smear tests.

If a problem is suspected a colposcopy is done to look at cells on the cervix. A colposcope is a kind of small telescope with a light which is used to view the cervix. The scope magnifies the cells so the doctor can detect any changes. The doctor may take a small sample of cells (called a biopsy), which will be looked at in a laboratory.

The colposcopy may feel uncomfortable. If you have a biopsy taken you may have a dull ache like a mild period pain, with slight bleeding.

If you have genital warts on your cervix or vagina, they'll usually be removed by freezing or by laser treatment under local anaesthetic.

Remember, after treatment, using condoms can reduce your risk of getting or passing on sexually transmitted infections.

This factsheet is one of a series which give information on the following range of infections and diseases: bacterial vaginosis, chlamydia, cystitis, genital herpes, genital warts, gonorrhoea, hepatitis (A, B and C), non-specific urethritis, penile cancer, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), prostate cancer, pubic lice, scabies, syphilis, testicular cancer, thrush and trichomonas vaginalis.

Free copies of any of these factsheets are available from GP surgeries, NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics, or your local health promotion unit (in the phone book under your local Health Authority).
Signs and symptoms
After you have been infected with the wart virus it usually takes between 1 and 3 months for warts to appear on your genitals but can take much longer.

You or your partner may notice pinkish/white small lumps or larger cauliflower-shaped lumps on the genital area. Warts can appear around the vulva, the penis, the scrotum or the anus. They may occur singly or in groups. They may itch, but are usually painless. Often there are no other symptoms, and the warts may be difficult to see. In women warts can develop inside the vagina and on the cervix. If a woman has warts on her cervix, this may cause slight bleeding or, very rarely, an unusual coloured vaginal discharge.

Not everyone who comes into contact with the virus will develop warts.

How genital warts are passed on
Warts are spread through skin-to-skin contact. If you have sex or genital contact with someone who has genital warts you may develop them too.

They can be passed on during vaginal or anal sex. (It is possible for warts to spread to the area around the anus without having anal sex.)

Where to go for help
- Your local NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic. You can find details of your nearest NHS sexual health clinic in the phone book under genito-urinary medicine (GUM), sexually transmitted diseases (STD) or venereal diseases (VD). Or phone your local hospital and ask for the ‘special’ or GUM clinic. Or check our website (www.playingsafely.co.uk) for a directory of GUM clinics in the UK. You will get free, confidential advice and treatment. You can go to any clinic anywhere in the country – you don’t have to go to a local one – and you don’t have to be referred by your GP. (Non-NHS sexual health clinics may not always offer the full range of services which are available at NHS sexual health clinics.)
- Your own GP.

The tests for genital warts
A doctor or nurse can usually tell whether you have genital warts just by looking. If warts are suspected but not obvious, the doctor may apply a weak vinegar-like solution to the outside of the genital area. This turns any warts white.

To check for any hidden warts, the doctor may carry out an internal examination of the vagina or anus.

Diagnosis and treatment
As genital warts are caused by a virus and not a bacteria, antibiotics will not get rid of them.

Commonly a clinic will prescribe an anti-wart liquid or cream such as Podophyllotoxin, which can be used at home. Another common treatment is freezing the warts or laser treatment. Often more than one kind of treatment is necessary before the warts are gone.

These treatments may be uncomfortable, but they should not be painful. If your treatment hurts, tell the doctor.

You should get individual advice about having sex during treatment from your doctor, nurse or health adviser.

Never try to treat genital warts by yourself. Always seek medical advice.

If you’re pregnant, or trying to become pregnant, it is important that you tell your doctor, as podophyllin treatment could harm the developing baby and another treatment will be used.

Taking care of yourself and your partner
If you have genital warts:
- Keep your genitals clean and dry.
- Don’t use scented soaps and bath oils or vaginal deodorants, as these may irritate the warts.
- Use condoms when having sex. Remember, condoms will only protect against the wart virus if they cover the affected areas.
- Make sure that your partner has a check-up too, as they may have warts which they haven’t noticed.

Follow-up
It is important to return regularly for treatment until your warts have gone so that the doctor or nurse can check progress and make any necessary changes in your treatment. Sometimes treatment can take a long time.

The majority of people whose warts initially disappear will get a recurrence.

(continued overleaf)