

## Warts

**Warts are non-cancerous skin growths caused by a viral infection in the top layer of the skin or mucous membranes. Viruses that cause warts belong to a "family" called human papillomavirus (HPV). There are over 100 different types of HPV. The appearance of a wart depends on where it is growing. Warts are usually skin colored and feel rough to the touch, but can be dark, flat or smooth.**

### **How many kinds of warts are there?**

There are several different kinds of warts including:

- Common warts
- Foot warts
- Flat warts
- Genital warts

Common warts usually grow around the nails, on the fingers and on the backs of the hands. They are more common where skin has been broken, for example where fingernails/hangnails are bitten.

Foot warts are usually on the soles of the feet and are called plantar warts. When plantar warts grow in clusters they are known as mosaic warts. Most plantar warts do not stick up because the pressure of walking flattens them and pushes them back into the skin. These warts often have black dots that are actually blood vessels. Plantar warts have a bad reputation because they can be painful, feeling like a stone in the shoe, and are often difficult to resolve.

Flat warts are smaller and smoother than other warts. They tend to grow in great numbers - 20 to 100 at any one time. They can occur anywhere, but in children they are most common on the face. In adults they are often found in the beard area in men and on the legs in women. Irritation from shaving probably accounts for this.

Genital warts (also called condyloma) have become a common and worrisome problem in adults. They tend to be small and flat but can be thin and tall. These are soft, not rough and scaly like other warts. They can occur on the genitalia, within the vagina, on the cervix, on the penis, and around the anus or within the rectum. The HPVs that cause genital warts rarely cause warts of the hands or feet but can cause warts in the mouth. Genital warts have been linked to cancer of the genital area.

### **How do you get warts?**

Warts probably are passed from person to person, sometimes indirectly. The time between the first contact and the time that the warts can be seen is often several months. The risk of catching hand, foot and flat warts is small. Wearing shower thongs, taking proper care of hands and feet can limit the spread of warts. Genital warts seem to be more contagious. It is important to use precautions to limit the spread of genital warts.

### **Why do some people get warts and others don't?**

Some people get warts depending on how often they are exposed to the virus. Warts occur more easily if the skin has been damaged in some way, which explains the high frequency in people who bite their nails or pick at their cuticles. Some people are just more likely to contract warts than others, just like some people catch colds more easily than others do. Weakened immune systems, lack of adequate rest, poor nutrition, increased stress and close living quarters can also contribute to catching the wart virus.

### **Do warts need to be treated?**

Warts often disappear without treatment over a period of several months to years. However, since warts can be spread to others or new areas of the body, it is reasonable to treat most people, especially if the warts are bothersome or painful.

### **How are warts treated at McKinley Health Center?**

There are a number of different treatment options available. They each have very similar rates of effectiveness and can take a number of weeks in order to work. Mediplast is a treatment option that involves applying a 40% salicylic acid plaster to the wart(s).

Another treatment option that has been found to be equally effective involves applying duct tape to the wart(s). Both Mediplast and duct tape have very similar advantages and disadvantages. Some of the advantages of these methods include convenience, minimal to no discomfort, inexpensive, safe and easy to use. The disadvantages include minor skin irritation and the need for self-application. Cryotherapy is another treatment option that is available at McKinley. Cryotherapy is the freezing of warts with liquid nitrogen. Repeat treatment at 1-2 week intervals is often necessary for complete resolution. The primary advantage to cryotherapy is that the wart treatment is done in the office. However, the disadvantages include pain, both during and after treatment, the risk of infection and scarring at the site of treatment, and the multiple office visits that are often required.

### **Can I treat my own warts without seeing a health care provider?**

There are some wart remedies available without a prescription. However, you might mistake another kind of skin growth for a wart, and end up treating something serious as though it were a wart. If you have any questions about either the diagnosis or the correct way to treat a wart, you should seek medical advice.

### **What about the use of hypnosis or “folk” remedies?**

Many people, patients and doctors alike, believe folk remedies and hypnosis are effective. Since warts may disappear without treatment, it's hard to know whether it was the folk remedy or just the passage of time that led to the cure. Since warts are generally harmless, there may be times where these treatments are appropriate. Medical treatments can always be used if necessary.

### **What about the problem or recurrent warts?**

Sometimes it seems as if new warts appear as fast as old ones go away. This may happen because the old warts had shed virus into the surrounding skin before they were treated. In reality new "baby" warts are growing up around the original "mother" warts. The best way to limit this is to treat new warts as quickly as they develop so they have little time to shed virus into nearby skin.

### **Is there any research going on about warts?**

Research is moving along rapidly. There is great interest in new treatments, development of a vaccine against warts, and development of natural immunity to warts. Hopefully there will be a solution to the annoying problem of warts in the not too distant future.

If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: **Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700**

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

Visit the McKinley Health Center Web site at: <http://www.mckinley.uiuc.edu>