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Questions About Warts

What are warts?

Warts are harmless skin growths caused by a virus. They have a rough surface on which tiny, dark specks can be seen. They may grow on any part of the body. Warts on the feet or other areas subject to pressure may be painful. Their appearance depends on their location. On the face and tops of the hands, warts protrude; on pressure areas, such as the palms of the hands and soles of the feet, they are pushed inward. Warts on the soles of the feet (called plantar warts) grow inward from the pressure of standing and walking and are often painful.

Warts are common. They may bleed if injured. However, they never turn cancerous.

What causes warts?

Warts are caused by a virus called the human papillomavirus (HPV). Certain types of HPV cause warts in the genital area; different HPV types cause warts on the hands or other areas of the body. Viruses are infectious agents, so warts are slightly contagious. Warts may spread on the body, since a wart is the source of a virus that can seed other areas. Research has not yet uncovered the reason why some individuals get warts easily while others never get them.

There are no proven methods to prevent the spread of warts. It is known that warts may spread from person to person by direct contact and that the virus may be transmitted on inanimate objects and surfaces such as the floor of a shower stall. It makes sense to use reasonable care to reduce the risk of spreading warts if anyone in your household has them. For example, avoid sharing towels. If the warts are on the soles of the feet, avoid sharing shoes, and wear rubber slippers when showering. It is also a good idea to wear rubber slippers when walking around public swimming pool or sauna areas.

Can warts resolve without treatment?

People have been trying to cure warts for thousands of years. The "success" of folk remedies for warts is very limited.

How are warts treated?

Because there is no proven way to kill HPV, many of the treatments for warts are designed to destroy the growth. These methods include freezing with liquid nitrogen and destruction by laser, chemicals or surgery.

The treatment for warts depend on their location and size, the patient's skin type, and other individual characteristics (for example, some chemical methods cannot be used if a patient is pregnant).

Is treatment always successful?

It is important to be realistic about your expectations. Warts are typically a stubborn and sometimes frustrating problem. It usually takes a number of treatment methods to eliminate warts. Medications your doctor prescribes may take weeks of use to show results.

No matter what treatment is used, warts occasionally fail to disappear. Sometimes, new warts will form while existing ones are being destroyed. Warts may also return weeks or months after an apparent cure. Don't be concerned if a wart recurs. Your doctor will repeat the treatment or use another method to eliminate the wart.