

Patient information from BMJ

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Warts (common)

Warts usually aren't serious and often clear up on their own. But if you want to get rid of them more quickly there are treatments available.

We've brought together the best and most up-to-date research about warts to see what treatments work. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.

What are warts?

Warts are growths on your skin. Warts on your feet are often called verrucas. Warts usually appear as flesh-coloured growths with a rough surface. They're often hard. But warts can sometimes be dark with a smooth surface.

Warts are caused by a virus that infects your skin (human papillomavirus or HPV). There are dozens of different types of this virus. Warts are more common in children than in adults, as many people become immune to the virus as they get older.

Children tend to get warts through casual everyday contact with other children. So there's not much you can do to prevent them. Some children get the virus in shared washing areas and showers, like those you find in swimming pools or gyms.

Some people try to prevent warts on their feet by wearing rubber verruca socks or flip flops in shared changing areas or showers. But there's no good evidence that this helps.

What are the symptoms?

Warts are usually harmless and painless. But many people don't like the way they look, and they can be upsetting if you get them on your face or hands.

Warts can sometimes be uncomfortable and sore, especially if you get them on the soles of your feet. Your doctor will probably be able to tell whether you have warts just by looking at your skin.

What treatments work?

If your warts aren't painful and you don't mind the way they look, you may want to wait and see if they clear up on their own. But if they bother you there are treatments that may help.

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Treatments to try first

It's hard to say which treatments work best for warts, partly because they often clear up by themselves. And many people choose to leave them and see if they go away.

But if you choose to try treatments, the ones listed below are the ones that doctors usually recommend first. It's important to remember that many treatments for warts can take two or three months to work. It's also important not to scratch or break the surface of a wart yourself, as this can spread the virus.

- **Salicylic acid** is a treatment that you paint onto your warts every day. It forms a film over the wart. You then rub away the surface of the wart with a file or pumice stone once a week, or as often as the instructions say to do so. Salicylic acid can irritate the skin around your wart.
- Putting a piece of **duct tape** over your wart may help get rid of it. Doctors aren't sure why it seems to work in some people, but it may be that the tape deprives the wart of oxygen and nutrients so that it dies. You need to replace the tape if it falls off. Then, once a week, you take the tape off and rub away the wart with an emery board or pumice stone. You then start again with a new piece of tape.
- **Cryotherapy** means freezing away the wart. Your doctor can freeze your wart for between 10 and 30 seconds using liquid nitrogen. You can also try **freezing sprays** that you can buy from a pharmacy without a prescription. But these don't get as cold as the freezing that your doctor can do, so they are unlikely to work as well. Freezing can be painful and can cause blistering and scarring.
- **Silver nitrate** is a hard substance. It comes as a sort of pencil. You wet it before pressing it against your wart.

Stubborn warts and warts that come back

If the treatments listed above don't work or if your warts keep coming back there are other treatments you can try.

- **Injections** of a substance called *Candida* antigen into warts can kill them. This treatment may also help prevent them from returning. You will need to have this treatment done by your doctor.
- **Imiquimod** comes as a cream that you rub into warts once a day. You will need a prescription from your doctor for this treatment. You use the cream for between 2 and 6 weeks. Most people find that it works well. But it can cause itching, swelling, and pain. Some people also find that it causes flu-like symptoms and aches and pains.
- **Surgery**, either with a scalpel or a laser, works well at removing warts. But warts often come back after surgery. So doctors recommend using other treatments after surgery, such as imiquimod.

Warts in people with weakened immune systems

If you have a weakened immune system, possibly because of other health problems, you should make sure that you get urgent treatment for warts. This is because warts can sometimes develop into skin cancer in people whose immune systems are weakened.

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Your doctor will probably recommend *Candida* antigen injections or imiquimod cream. If you have a lot of warts, your doctor may recommend other drug treatments to help your skin heal.

Warts on the face or neck

Warts on the face, neck, and lips are known as filiform warts. These are usually treated with cryotherapy (freezing) or surgery. If you have surgery you will need a local anaesthetic. Your doctor may also recommend using imiquimod cream after surgery.

What will happen to me?

Given time, warts often clear up on their own without any treatment. But treatments can help get rid of them sooner. Some warts don't clear up on their own and these can be difficult to treat. If you're finding it difficult to get rid of your warts you may need to try more than one treatment.

If you have a lot of warts or if they come back after treatment, your doctor may recommend that you avoid having your hands wet for long periods, and that you dry them properly after washing. It's also a good idea to use clean towels when drying yourself after you wash. This can help prevent re-infection.

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