



Warts

What Causes Warts?

Warts are a very common problem, and it is estimated that 10% of children and young adults are infected. In fact, three fourths of the U.S. population has serologic (blood test) evidence of infection with the wart virus at some point in their lives.

These harmless skin growths can develop on any part of the body. Their appearance depends on their location. On the face and tops of the hands, warts are most often raised. Flat warts (*verruca plana*) commonly occur on the face, arms and legs. They are usually small, only slightly raised and skin colored, making them harder to see. Lesions on the sole or bottom of the foot are often compressed or appear flat because of the pressure exerted on this site during walking. Walking on plantar warts is often painful. Tiny, dark dots resembling pepper flakes can often be seen within warts; these represent the tops of blood vessels which feed the warts.

Although warts are generally not a risk to health, they can be a nuisance. They may bleed if injured, interfere with walking, as well as cause pain and embarrassment. Common warts do not turn cancerous, but those lesions found in the genital area are occasionally at risk for development into more serious lesions later in life. Since a virus causes warts, they are contagious. Warts may spread on the body or to other children. We don't know why some persons get warts while others never get them.

People have been trying to cure warts for thousands of years. The "success" of folk remedies for warts is due to the fact that warts often disappear by themselves, especially in young children. The average common wart, if left untreated, will usually disappear within a 2 year time period. This spontaneous disappearance is less common in older children and adults.

Treatment

There is no single perfect treatment of warts, since we are unable to kill the wart virus. Treatment consists of destroying the outer layer of skin that the wart grows on, thus ridding the body of the wart. This can be done with chemicals, by freezing with liquid nitrogen, or with laser surgery. A prescription for a topical numbing cream can be provided to help ease discomfort associated with the treatment. It should be applied 90 minutes prior to the treatment. You may request the prescription from your doctor. In some cases an oral or topical medication that stimulates the immune system to clear warts has been used for warts that are multiple and difficult to resolve. The topical form of medicine used, Imiquimod, stimulates your skin cells to produce Interferon and other virus fighting agents, which may help clear the warts without utilizing destructive means. Use of these immune type medications is considered "off-label" in young children, but is frequently used for persistent warts unresponsive to standard treatment plans.

The treatment to be used on your wart depends on their location and size, your type of skin and the judgment of the dermatologist. At times, treatment may not be indicated. Sometimes new warts will form while existing ones are being destroyed. All we can do is treat the new warts when they become large enough to be seen. No matter what treatment is used, warts occasionally fail to disappear. Warts may return weeks or months after an apparent cure. Don't be concerned if a wart recurs, just call to make an appointment for further therapy. The treatment may be repeated, or a different method may be used to get rid of the warts.

Liquid Nitrogen Treatment

Liquid nitrogen is a cold, liquefied gas with a temperature of 196 degrees below zero Celsius (-321 Fahrenheit). It is used to freeze and destroy superficial skin growths such as warts and molluscum. Liquid nitrogen causes stinging and mild pain while the growth is being frozen and then thaws. The discomfort usually lasts only a few minutes.

After liquid nitrogen treatment your skin may become swollen and red. The skin may blister and form a blood blister. A scab (crust) forming, usually follows this. It will fall off by itself in one to three weeks. The skin growth will come off with the scab, leaving healthy new skin.

No special care is needed after liquid nitrogen treatment. You can wash your skin as usual. If clothing irritates the area, cover it with a small bandage (Band-Aid) and Polysporin antibiotic ointment. Sometimes liquid nitrogen treatment fails.

Because one liquid nitrogen treatment does not usually completely remove the wart, we often recommend topical treatments following liquid nitrogen therapy however you should not start these treatments until the site can tolerate them. Wait at least 3 days after liquid nitrogen therapy has been used, or wait until the blister has healed over (often 5-7 days).

Home Care Instructions for Warts

Please follow instructions closely and do not skip days of treatment.

- 1) Soak warts for 10 minutes in very warm water. Pat area dry with a towel.
- 2) Gently pare off the dead skin from the warts, using a pumice stone or knife blade. Stop if it becomes painful or starts to bleed.
- 3) Apply Occlusal, Duofilm, Wart-off or other 17% salicylic acid to cover each wart. Wait for area to turn white before proceeding.
- 4) After salicylic acid liquid, cover each wart with a piece of Mediplast, Transversal, or other band-aid type wart treatment material cut slightly larger than the wart.
- 5) Cover warts airtight with white cloth surgical tape or duct tape.
- 6) Repeat the steps daily. When the tape is removed, it will pull off dead layers of skin from the wart and surrounding normal skin.
- 7) If the skin is severely irritated, do not apply for 1-2 days.

This is the medical opinion of Savannah River Dermatology. For additional information, please contact us at 706-691-7079.