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Over-the-counter remedies for genital warts? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I found out that I have a genital wart on my penis. I went to the doctor a while back and he put some medicine on it and also gave me a prescription. After using the prescribed medicine for a few weeks, the wart went away. After a few months, the wart returned. I do not have any more of the prescription, nor do I have insurance anymore. My question with this is... can you use over-the-counter wart removal medicines on genital warts?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Wart on your finger? Wart on your penis? Although they're both warts, unfortunately, they don't have the same type of treatment. This for one very major reason: the skin tissue on other parts of your body (hands and feet, for example) is much less sensitive than genital tissue. This means that using over-the-counter (OTC) remedies designed for non-genital warts could lead to more anguish than your warts may already be causing you. Ouch! While there may not be OTC options, there may be other affordable ways to treat this wart (more on this in a bit).

Genital warts, like warts on the rest of your body, are caused by various strains of the human papillomavirus, commonly known as HPV. Strains of HPV that affect the genital area can be transmitted through any type of skin-to-skin genital contact (including anal, vaginal, or oral sex) and can stay unnoticed for long stretches of time without causing warts. HPV is one of the most common STIs (sexually transmitted infections) out there, so you're not alone. It's possible for genital warts to flare up on occasion after treatment (as you have experienced). In case you're wondering, STIs such as herpes or syphilis can cause sores in the genital areas that may look similar to warts. Sores caused by other STIs require different treatments, so seeking a diagnosis from a health care provider can help ensure you're taking an appropriate course of action.

With time, genital warts may clear up on their own. Unless they're causing you distress or discomfort, the lesions themselves present little risk to you. Other strains of HPV (sometimes known as “high-risk” strains) are associated with more serious health issues, such as cancer. However, the strains that cause genital warts aren't the strains that cause cancer, so you may decide that leaving it untreated for now makes sense for you.

That said, keep in mind that the virus (though transmissible with or without visible symptoms) is more contagious during flare-ups and may be passed more easily to a sexual partner. Condoms and dental dams can help minimize the risk of spreading HPV and other STIs, but they're not 100 percent effective at doing so. Talking to partners about STIs can be awkward, but Planned Parenthood has some [helpful tips](#) [2] for talking about HPV that might help you feel more comfortable navigating those conversations.

If finances are keeping you away from a health care provider, you may have access to some affordable options. Though it can vary from clinic to clinic, organizations such as [Planned Parenthood](#) [3] often offer sliding scale fee structures, low cost, or free services to increase access to testing and treatment for STIs such as genital warts, even for people under age 18 (but this may vary by state). You might also contact your local health department to find out about affordable or free testing and treatment options near you.

When it comes to smoothing things over (down under), know that you have options despite your financial limitations. If you choose to wait it out and see if it heals on its own, make sure to communicate with future partners about potential risks before diving back into the sheets.

Alice!

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