Long term effects of genital warts for women

Dear Alice,

An ex-girlfriend told me recently that she has genital warts. She was a virgin at the time we met so I must have given it to her. I am waiting for my test results but I must be infected. I have learned (too late!) that we can’t get rid of the virus. If I get married some time later, would I have to use condoms all my life with my wife so I don’t pass the virus to her? What are the complications for women?

— NANH

Answer

Dear NANH,

Genital warts, also called condyloma, are growths caused by certain strains of the human papillomavirus (HPV). They are often, but not always, spread sexually. The incubation time (time from exposure to appearance of growths) may range from a few weeks to many months or years. Some people harbor the virus and transmit it to others without ever developing the growths themselves. Researchers have found that the virus can be found in some people prior to sexual activity. With a long incubation period and the potential presence of the virus without any sexual activity, it’s often difficult to determine who infected whom (not to mention when).

Available treatments for genital warts do not completely eliminate the virus from the body. Instead, treatment is aimed at removing uncomfortable growths, reducing the number of viral particles, and, perhaps, stimulating the immune response to help control the infection. Treatment depends on the areas involved. In most cases, chemical, electrocautery (heat), cryotherapy (freezing), or laser treatment is used. Excision (surgical removal of infected tissue) is used only occasionally. Most treatments are done in a health care provider’s office, and are tailored to the needs of the patient.

Genital warts are not caused by the same strains of HPV that are linked to cervical cancer. If you do have genital warts, you could transmit the virus to future partner(s), however you would not be transmitting the type of the virus that has potentially serious long-term health effects for women (unless you are also infected with those strains). Although your partner may understandably not
be thrilled about the idea of having genital warts, which can be embarrassing and uncomfortable, there are no serious health consequences. To help reduce the risk of transmission, you may want to use condoms and/or dams with your future partner(s). Remember that these methods aren’t 100 percent effective, since the virus can be present on areas of skin that aren’t covered.

Fortunately another prevention option exists. Two vaccines that protect against common strains of HPV are now available — both versions protect against the HPV strains associated with cervical cancer, one also protects against the HPV strains that lead to genital warts. To learn more about the HPV vaccine read the related questions below. If you or your partner(s) are within the approved age range, the vaccine may be helpful in preventing transmission of genital warts.

In terms of long-term health effects of HPV for women, certain HPV strains (unrelated to genital warts) are associated with Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia (CIN), also known as cervical dysplasia (abnormal cell growth on your cervix). Unchecked and untreated it can progress, possibly to cancer; or, it can heal on its own. The more severe the dysplasia, the more likely it is to progress to cancer. Mild dysplasia may resolve on its own, without any treatment. (For more information on dysplasia, read What is dysplasia? [2].) There are effective treatments for CIN and cervical cancer. It’s recommended that women with suspected condyloma be thoroughly evaluated, which includes viewing the cervix through a special microscope known as a colposcope. It’s also advised that all women get Pap smears (which check for cervical dysplasia) at least every three years, within three years of the onset of sexual activity or when they turn 21, whichever comes first.

With your future partner, the two of you may decide you are comfortable with a mutual decision not to use condoms. Before forgoing safer sex precautions, you can ask each other; Am I willing to treat warts if I get them? Will transmitting the warts to my partner be a strain on our relationship? While you’re at it, why not also consider getting tested together for other sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?

For more information, talk with the health care provider who gives you your test results. You can also try the American Sexual Health Association (ASHA) HPV and Cervical Cancer Prevention Resource Center [3] for information on diagnosis, treatment, prevention, emotional support, and referrals.

Alice!
Category:
Sexual & Reproductive Health [4]
Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI's) [5]
Genital Warts, HPV, & Condyloma [6]

Related questions

No symptoms, but concerned about genital warts [8]
Clear of HPV symptoms = Clear of virus? [9]
HPV vaccine for genital warts and cervical cancer [10]
Transmission of genital warts AND medical reference book

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside)
Medical Services (CUIMC)
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