Dear Alice,

Last night, I went on a date with a man whom I found to have warts on his hands and I am very concerned. Are warts contagious when they are not in the genital area? We plan to work out and then maybe later, we'll give each other a massage, but if it is contagious I really don't want his hands on me. I know you are very busy but I would really like to know before tonight. Thanks a lot.

Sincerely,
Concerned

Answer

Dear Concerned,

Warts can be worrisome, so it's understandable that you're anxious about getting touchy-feely on your upcoming date. If what you've seen on your sweetie's mitts are in fact warts, it's good that you're asking for more information. Warts of any kind are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). Altogether, there are over 100 different strains of this virus. Some of these strains cause genital warts [2], whereas other strains of HPV lead to common warts that tend to pop up on the hands and fingers (which might be the type your beau has), plantar warts [3] that grow on feet, and flat warts that grow on hands and legs. Children, young adults, and those with a weakened immune system are more likely to develop warts. As you suspected, warts are contagious and are spread by direct contact skin-to-skin contact with an infected person or by touching an object like a towel, razor, or exercise equipment that's been used by an infected person. However, before you call off any potential touching, there are ways to prevent the spread of warts! Before getting into that, though, read on for more on these bothersome bumps.

Beyond just skin-to-skin contact, warts also tend to spread where the skin is broken (e.g., from biting or picking fingernails or hangnails). They may be rough to the touch and have black dots that look like seeds (these are actually small, clotted blood vessels). While warts may clear up on their own, some folks will choose to speak with a health care provider about removal and there are a number of options from which to choose (read Body wart treatment [4] for more information).

Keep in mind, there isn't a cure for the virus that causes warts, so that means it's possible that the warts will return in the same area or a new spot. If new warts are appearing just as
soon as old ones are being treated or removed, it may be a good idea to consult with a dermatologist to treat the new warts as they appear. Treating the warts as they pop up can prevent them from having time to shed their virus cells into the skin, and allowing new warts to grow.

So, how you can reduce your risk of contracting warts? There are several options you might want to consider:

- Avoid picking or scratching your fingers and nail.
- Encourage your partner to avoid picking or scratching at warts.
- Avoid touching someone's wart.
- Wash your hands if you come into contact with someone's warts.
- Wipe down shared surfaces (such as exercise equipment) after use.

List adapted from the American Academy of Dermatology [5].

Still uneasy about your date's warts? While it may be uncomfortable, you might consider talking with him about your worries. For example, you could say something like "I'm looking forward to a rub-down, but I'm worried about contracting warts." From there, you could talk about some possible prevention methods. You might ask him to don a pair of gloves, or you could simply wear clothing that covers the massage area to minimize any skin-to-skin contact during the massage. You might also consider forgoing the back rub and suggest another activity instead. For more tips on how to talk to your date, check out Personal grooming? Can I tell my date to spiff up? [6] from the Go Ask Alice! archives.

Alice!
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