Dear Alice,

What do genital warts look like? I think that I might have them. I am a virgin but have had unprotected oral sex with two people.

?Need to know

Answer

Dear Need to know,

Genital warts look similar to warts that might develop on any other part of the body, but they appear on the genitals. (This includes the penis, scrotum, vulva, anus, vaginal lining, cervix, or rectum.) They're dry, often painless growths, rough in texture, and gray or pink in color. They can be flat or raised, and they vary in size. Untreated warts can grow together to form a cauliflower-like mass. The incubation time (time from exposure to appearance of growths) may range from a few weeks to many months or years.

Genital warts are caused by human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is the name of a group of over 100 related viruses. Some types, or the "high risk types," can lead to cancer of many of those precious genital areas mentioned above, the most common being cervical cancer. The "low risk types" are the ones that cause genital warts. Most people who are infected with HPV have no symptoms, and the infection will clear on its own. However, even without symptoms, the virus can be transmitted through genital contact including oral, anal, or vaginal sex. Genital warts can be removed by a doctor, but there is no cure for the virus itself.

There are two HPV vaccines available that can help protect against infection. One protects against four strains of HPV: two that account for 70 percent of cervical cancers and two that account for 90 percent of genital warts. The other protects only against the two strains of HPV most commonly associated with cervical cancer. The vaccine is most effective if administered before any exposure to the virus. For more information, check out HPV vaccine for genital warts and cervical cancer.

There are a couple of strategies to reduce the risk of contracting (or transmitting) genital warts. First and foremost is to limit the number of sexual partners (regardless of the type of sexual contact). You might also want to consider using a condom or latex dam any time you
give or receive oral sex to reduce your risk of getting HPV. Condoms are also helpful for those that choose to have penetrative intercourse; be aware, though, that the virus may be present on areas of the skin that are not covered.

If you think that you might have genital warts, you can schedule a visit with your health care provider. While you may be anxious about talking to a health care provider about this issue, knowing more and taking charge of your own sexual health can really put your mind at ease.

Alice!

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Published date:
Oct 01, 1993
Last reviewed on:
Jun 02, 2015

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