



Can warts be spread from hands to genitals?

Question

<p>Dear Alice,</p>

<p>Both my boyfriend and I have warts on our hands. Can these warts be transferred to our genital areas?</p>

Answer

<p>Dear Reader,</p>


<p>The viruses that cause warts on the hands are different from the viruses that cause genital warts. Humans are susceptible to hundreds of wart and herpes viruses, and they're all unique. Although warts and herpes are contagious, warts on your hands or feet cannot be transferred to the genital area, and vice versa.</p>


<p>The human papillomavirus (HPV) is the culprit behind all warts on the human body. HPV has hundreds of different variations — or “strains” — with which an individual may become infected. Only some HPV viruses are spread through sexual contact, while others are spread through other means. Warts found on your hands cannot be spread through sexual contact.</p>


<p>Formed individually or in clusters, benign warts are thickened bumps on the hands or feet that contain HPV. Plantar, filiform, and flat warts are the most common type of hand and foot warts. These warts grow and eventually develop their own blood supply and nerve cells. Tiny black dots, called “seeds,” which are actually small, clotted blood cells, often form in patterns on the surface of wart tissues. Looking for “seeds” can help you distinguish a wart from a callous or blister.</p>


<p>Like all skin cells, those that make up the wart eventually shed over time. When wart skin cells containing the virus are shed from the rest of the skin, the virus goes along with them. Therefore, direct skin-to-skin contact with shedding skin cells, or contact through fabrics, floors, and other surfaces, may result in wart transmission. This is especially true if warts are picked or scratched at, which facilitates virus exposure and transmission.</p>


<p>If left untreated, hand and foot warts can spread to others' hands or feet (and sometimes legs, arms, face, or midsection) when uninfected individuals have openings to their skin, such as cuts, scrapes, and hangnails. Hand and foot wart transmission is relatively common among children and people with compromised immune systems, such as individuals living with HIV as well as organ transplant recipients. Most adults are likely to have developed immunity to wart-

causing viruses throughout life, so skin-to-skin contact through hand-holding or playing footsie is not likely to result in wart transmission after adolescence.

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Most hand and foot warts are harmless and do not require treatment. In fact, many of them disappear once your immune system recognizes and fights off the virus. However, if you have a painful or bothersome wart that you want removed, you can try various over-the-counter treatments such as wart patches and creams containing salicylic acid. These treatment methods may work more effectively if the wart is soaked in warm water before application, and if the wart is gently abraded with a sanitized nail file or pumice stone between treatments. However, if these methods don't work, you can schedule an appointment with a dermatologist to explore other options. Your dermatologist will first examine the wart to rule out other types of lumps and bumps. After that, your dermatologist might remove a small section of the wart tissue and conduct a biopsy to diagnose it properly. Finally, prescription creams or medications, and in some cases, cryotherapy (freezing), electrosurgery or curettage (burning), chemical peels, injections, or minor surgery (excision), may be required to remove wart tissue. Make sure to inform your doctor or dermatologist if you have diabetes, because cuts or burns could potentially cause permanent nerve damage in your feet.

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In contrast to hand and foot warts, genital warts are transmitted through sexual contact between mucous membranes. These warts manifest in cauliflower-like bumps in moist areas in and near the genitals (including the anus). Genital warts are most common among young adults (ages 15 to 30) who have multiple sex partners and in women HPV is highly associated with cervical cancer. Using barriers like condoms and dental dams may help to prevent transmission during vaginal, anal, and oral sex. Mothers can transmit genital herpes to their babies during childbirth; so pregnant women with genital herpes should discuss prevention with their doctors before their due dates. For more detailed information about genital warts, take a look at "<http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/what-do-genital-warts-look>" Q&A from the *Go Ask Alice!* archives.

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To learn more about warts, herpes, and other skin concerns, spend a few moments browsing the <http://www.aad.org/skin-conditions/dermatology-a-to-z/warts> website. If you're worried about warts and wish to discuss your concerns with a health care provider, consider scheduling an appointment with your primary care provider or a dermatologist.

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