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Information about warts and verrucae

Warts are small rough lumps on the skin. They are caused by a virus (human papillomavirus) which causes a reaction in the skin. Warts can occur anywhere on the body but occur most commonly on hands and feet.

Verrucas are warts on the soles of the feet. They are the same as warts on any other part of the body. However, they may look flatter, as they tend to get trodden in and are more likely to cause discomfort.

Most people develop one or more warts at some time in their lives, usually before the age of 20. About 1 in 10 people in the UK have warts at any one time. Almost as many as 1 in 3 children or young people may have warts. They are not usually harmful. Sometimes verrucas are painful if they press on a sensitive part of the foot. Some people find their warts unsightly.

There is no need to treat warts if they are not causing you any problems.

Half the number of children with warts will find they have disappeared within a year without any treatment. Two thirds will have gone within two years. The chance that a wart will go quickly is greatest in children and young people. Sometimes warts last longer, particularly in adults.

Treatment can often clear warts more quickly. However, treatments are time-consuming and some can be painful.

Parents often want treatment for their children; however children are often not bothered by warts. In most cases, simply waiting for them to go is usually the best thing to do.

On balance it is usually only worth treating a wart or a verruca if it is troublesome. For example, if it is painful. Facial warts should not be treated by GP's and if necessary referred to a Dermatologist.

Specific Treatments

The only treatment for warts that has been shown to work (in other words clears warts more quickly than doing nothing) is applying **salicylic acid**.

There are various lotions, paints and special plasters that contain salicylic acid. This acid burns off the top layer of the wart. You can buy salicylic acid at pharmacies, or your doctor may prescribe one. It usually comes as paint or a gel. Read the instructions in the packet on how to use the brand you buy or are prescribed, or ask your pharmacist for advice.

Usually:

- You need to apply it each day for at least **3-12 months**. Persevere – if you give up too soon, it will not work.
- Before applying the salicylic acid, soak the wart in water for 10 minutes, and rub off the dead tissue from the top of the wart, with an emery file (or similar).
- You should not apply salicylic acid to the face because of the risk of skin irritation which may cause scarring.
- If you have diabetes or poor circulation, you should use salicylic acid only on the advice of a doctor.

If you put the acid on correctly each day you have a reasonable chance of clearing the warts within 3-12 months. Studies vary when trying to determine the success rate. However, a review of lots of studies definitely showed evidence that salicylic acid is better than no treatment. It also showed it is the treatment option with the best evidence that it works. Also applying it regularly can reduce spread of the virus.

Other Treatments

Freezing warts (cryotherapy) with liquid nitrogen, can reduce the size of warts but it can be painful and cause blistering of the skin. It has been provided by GP practices in the past but the evidence suggests that freezing is no better than treating with salicylic acid. Aggressive freezing is associated with more side effects e.g. scarring.

Some people try various other treatments such as applying duct tape or using a homeopathic remedy called Thuja which can be applied as a cream or taken as a tablet. The evidence for these is poor but they are harmless and some people find them helpful. Patients can purchase Thuja from their local health food shop or over the counter at the pharmacy.

Use of duct tape to clear viral warts – please click on the following link:
<http://www.nottinghameczema.org.uk/documents/using-duct-tape-to-clear-viral-warts.pdf>

If a wart is very large or troublesome other treatments such as laser treatment or light therapy (photodynamic therapy) can be provided by the NHS. Your GP would need to refer you for these treatments. Podiatrists sometimes offer needling or curettage (scraping off the surface) of verrucae.

www.patient.info article used as reference

More information

www.patient.info

www.nhsinform.scot