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Warts (Verruca Vulgaris)

Warts are simply areas of skin that grow faster than normal due to the presence of the wart virus. Viruses are infectious and some people, especially children, are more susceptible than others. They are most common on the hands, feet and face but they can grow almost anywhere on the body. Their appearance depends on their location. On the face and tops of the hands, warts are raised. Warts have a rough surface on which tiny, dark dots can often be seen. On the soles of the feet the tissue becomes thickened from the pressure of standing and the warts (called plantar warts) are flatter. Walking on plantar warts is often painful.

Healthy patients will build up resistance over a period of time and eventually the body will cause the viral infection to disappear. This may take months or sometimes years but is the natural way the body deals with warts. If they are allowed to disappear in this way it is less likely that a person will get any further ones as one will then be immune to the virus.

Treatment

There is no single perfect treatment for warts, since there is no cure for the wart virus. Treatment consists of destroying the skin that the wart grows in, and thus ridding the body of the wart virus. This can be done with chemicals, by freezing with liquid nitrogen, with laser surgery, by scraping the skin using a special instrument or by destroying the tissue using an electric needle. Sometimes new warts will form while existing ones are being destroyed. All we can do is treat the new warts when they become large enough to be seen.

No matter what treatment is used, warts occasionally fail to disappear. Warts may return weeks or months after an apparent cure. Don't be concerned if a wart recurs, just call to make an appointment for further therapy. The treatment may be repeated, or a different method may be used to remove the warts.

The first treatment to try on a wart is removal with salicylic acid which is available over the counter without a prescription.

Liquid nitrogen cryotherapy is the standard treatment to treat warts when salicylic acid treatment has not eliminated a wart or if quick treatment is desired. Cryotherapy for warts involves freezing a wart using a very cold substance (liquid nitrogen). The liquid nitrogen application usually takes less than a minute. It is effective about 50% of the time. Frequent applications of liquid nitrogen are needed to cure more stubborn warts. If done correctly, cryotherapy poses little risk of permanent scarring.

Warts around the fingers and nails are definitely a challenge. For finger and toe warts there is a very good, but unusual treatment using 'duct tape'. There are other treatments such as contact hypersensitization and Bleomycin injections for resistant warts. These often work, but may have some side effects. Tagamet is an oral medication used for ulcers that may help boost the immune response. It is only effective in children, and not consistently so.

Burning warts off with a laser or electric needle is often effective, but can scar. It is 70% effective (within 1-3 treatments spaced two weeks apart) for difficult warts. Local anesthetic may be used, depending on the number of warts to be removed or the size of the area to be treated.