

TREATING COMMON WARTS

What are warts?

Warts are bumps on the skin that can happen anywhere on the body. They are caused by infection with the human papillomavirus, or HPV. Warts typically do not cause any symptoms, though they can be a little painful if they're in just the wrong spot. There are several types of warts. "Common warts" are those found over most of the body, often the hands and feet. Common warts on the bottom of the feet are also called "plantar warts." (Warts in the groin are called "venereal warts;" they're treated a bit differently from common warts, so we're not including them in this article.)

Are warts contagious?

Warts can spread to different parts of your body if you touch or scratch them. You can also spread HPV to other people if you share towels or razors. You can get common warts by biting your nails or plantar warts from walking barefoot in public areas, like a locker room.

Do they need to be treated?

Not always. Most warts will go away on their own as the body's immune system fights them off, but it may take a while—from 3 months to 2 years, or sometimes even longer. And they can recur.

In children, warts may appear to "bloom out," and children sometimes develop multiple warts in various locations in a short time. Then a few months later they may all disappear. If warts aren't bothering the child, it is often best to leave them alone. The things we do to treat them are well-tolerated in adults, but may be frightening or too painful for small children.

How are warts treated? (If you have diabetes or poor circulation, talk to your doctor before treating warts.)

The most time-honored and proven treatment for warts is an over-the-counter medicine called *salicylic acid*. This is available as a generic preparation at most pharmacies, or the familiar brand name *Compound W*. It comes as a liquid that you paint on and allow to dry, or small medicated stick-on pads.

Always follow any specific directions on the product label, but it is usually best to apply salicylic acid after bathing or soaking the feet to soften the thick skin over the wart. Then use an emery board to file down as much dead skin as you can. Don't use a reusable object like a file or pumice stone, since it can hold viral particles and re-infect other spots later. It's best to wear gloves and wash your hands after doing this. Don't file hard enough to cause pain or draw blood; treating warts is a "slow-and-steady-wins-the-race" process.

Next, apply the salicylic acid to the wart; if necessary, cover it with a small bandage to keep it in place and prevent it from sticking to things. A good time to do this is in the evening, so you can sleep with it on. You can potentially leave it in place for 2-3 days, but if it becomes sore or dislodged, just go ahead and remove it.

Repeat this for 2-3 evenings. After that it's often a little sore, so you may want to give it a break, just gently filing with the emery board every couple days after bathing. In a week or so, you can do another round of treatments. Continue doing this until the wart disappears. Even though it may take a while, it will thin the wart down enough that it won't be very troublesome in the meantime. And if the wart reappears, repeat the process; if you catch a wart small and early, it will often respond pretty quickly.

If the salicylic acid is too irritating, use duct tape instead. Yes, plain old duct tape. Soak and file the skin as described above, then put a small piece of duct tape over the wart every night. You can even leave it on throughout the day if desired. The duct tape softens the wart and helps the dead skin shed faster; this is particularly useful on very thick, callused warts on the hands or feet, especially when they're around the fingernails.

What other things can your doctor do?

Your doctor may suggest freezing warts to try to get them to go away. This can be effective and is sometimes faster than using salicylic acid. However, it is less likely to be helpful on thick, callused skin, and can be a bit painful, depending on the location. Adults and older children usually tolerate this well, but small children may not. Over-the-counter freezing treatments can be helpful, but they generally aren't as effective as the methods your doctor uses.

There are several other medicines that can be tried, but some are very expensive, and in the big picture they aren't proven to be better than salicylic acid. Since warts eventually go away on their own or respond to inexpensive treatments, these other medicines aren't used very often or as first choices.

Where can I get more information about warts?

AAFP's Patient Education Resource Web site: <http://familydoctor.org/209.xml>.