

Patient education: Skin warts (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What do skin warts look like? — Skin warts are raised round or oval growths. They can be lighter or darker than the skin around them. Some warts have tiny black dots in them, often called seeds. Warts can appear alone or in groups that join and form patches.

Different types of warts affect different parts of the body:

- Common skin warts can show up anywhere on the skin but most often affect the fingers, hands, knees, and elbows ([picture 1](#)).
- When common warts are found around the fingernails, they are called “periungual” warts ([picture 2](#)).
- Plantar warts are found on the soles (bottoms) of the feet ([picture 3](#)).
- Flat warts are usually found on the back of the hands, face, and lower legs ([picture 4A-B](#)).

What causes skin warts? — Warts are caused by germs called viruses. You can get infected with the virus that causes warts by touching another person's wart. You can also get infected by touching objects that have the virus on them. For instance, people can catch warts by walking barefoot around pools, locker rooms, or gyms.

Should I see a doctor or nurse about my wart? — You should see a doctor or nurse if:

- You are not sure that what you have is a wart
- Your wart does not go away with home treatment
- You would like to use home treatment, but are not sure which treatment is right for you

What are the home treatments for warts? — There are a few home treatments to choose from. Most take weeks or even months to work. Warts can come back after treatment.

Not everyone needs treatment for warts. Some warts go away on their own within 2 years. But warts can also get bigger or spread, so many people decide to treat their warts.

Here are the home treatment options (which you can use together, if you want):

- **Salicylic acid** – Salicylic acid is a mild acid that you put on warts. It is sold in drugstores and comes in different forms, such as a liquid or patch. If you decide to try salicylic acid, follow the directions on the label. But do not use this treatment if you have a form of nerve damage called “neuropathy.”
- **Duct tape** – It sounds strange, but some people find that their warts go away if they cover them with duct tape for a while. You can buy duct tape at most home improvement stores. If you want

to try it on your warts, buy the silver tape, not the clear. The silver tape stays on better.

Here is what you should do:

1. Cover the wart with tape and leave the tape on for 6 days.
2. Remove the tape and soak the skin in warm water for 10 to 20 minutes.
3. Use an emery board or pumice stone to gently scrape the dead skin off the wart.
4. Leave the skin uncovered for 1 night.
5. Apply the tape for another 6 days.

If you do not see some improvement within 2 weeks, the tape is probably not going to work. But if it does seem to be working, you can use the tape for another 2 weeks.

Do not try duct tape on warts if you have diabetes, nerve damage (neuropathy), diseased arteries in the legs (peripheral artery disease), or any condition that makes your skin sensitive. If you have any of these conditions, duct tape can cause problems, such as skin sores or infection.

How do doctors and nurses treat warts? — Doctors and nurses have a few ways to treat warts. They often suggest combining the treatments they use with at-home treatments, like salicylic acid.

The doctor or nurse can:

- Freeze the wart off with a special fluid that gets very cold (called liquid nitrogen)
- Treat the wart with a medicine called [cantharidin](#) that destroys warts. This treatment is not painful at first, but it sometimes causes pain, blisters, and swelling shortly after use.
- Shave the wart off with a knife (after numbing the skin)
- Prescribe a skin cream that helps the body get rid of warts
- Inject the wart with a medicine that helps the body fight the virus that causes warts

If you have one of these treatments, ask your doctor or nurse what to expect after treatment. That way, if your skin starts to hurt or turns red you will know if it is normal. But if your skin starts to form pus, you should call your doctor or nurse right away.

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