Warts: Should I Treat Warts?

Here's a record of your answers. You can use it to talk with your doctor or loved ones about your decision.

1. Get the facts
2. Compare your options
3. What matters most to you?
4. Where are you leaning now?
5. What else do you need to make your decision?

1. Get the facts

Your options

- Treat warts.
- Don't treat warts.

This topic is for a person who is deciding about whether to treat a common wart or a plantar wart. It is not about genital warts.

Key points to remember

- Warts are harmless. In most cases, they go away on their own within months or years.
- If warts spread or cause pain, or if you don't like the way they look, you may want to treat them.
- Treatments for warts don't always work. Warts may come back in the same place or on a different part of your body.
- Treatment can take a lot of time, be painful, and cost a lot.

FAQs

What are warts?

Warts are skin growths caused by some types of the human papillomavirus (HPV). Warts form when the virus infects the top layer of your skin and causes your skin cells to grow very fast.

Warts can spread when you come in contact with the virus. You can infect yourself again when you touch the warts and then touch another part of your body. You can infect others when you share towels, razors, or other personal items.
You are most likely to get warts in places where your skin is broken, such as through cuts, hangnails, closely bitten nails, or scrapes.

Some types of the virus thrive in warm, damp places, such as showers, locker room floors, and swimming pool areas. Warts that you get on your feet (plantar warts) are common in swimmers whose feet are not only moist and softened, but are also scratched and broken by rough pool surfaces.

You won't get warts every time you come in contact with the virus. But some people are more likely than others to get warts.

How are warts treated?

Warts are usually harmless. In most cases, they go away on their own within months or years. But if they spread or cause pain, or if you don't like the way they look, you may want to treat them.

There are several ways to treat warts. For example, you can:

- **Use a home treatment** to soften and remove the layers of the skin that form the wart. These treatments include salicylic acid (such as Compound W and Occlusal) or tape occlusion (such as duct tape). You don't need a prescription to use these products.
- **Freeze the wart** with a very cold liquid that can kill the virus. This is called cryotherapy. You can first try an over-the-counter medicine to freeze your wart. Or you can have your doctor freeze it for you.
- **Use a prescription medicine** to stop the wart's growth, including retinoid (such as Avita and Retin-A). You can use the medicine at home, but you need a prescription. Retinoid is more commonly used to treat acne and aging skin. But it's sometimes used to treat warts.
- **Have surgery** that uses an intense beam (laser surgery) or an electrical current (electrosurgery) to burn off the wart. Or you can have the wart cut out (curettage).

If these treatments don't work, you can try putting a medicine on the wart to trigger your immune system to kill the wart virus. Or you can try a medicine called bleomycin that is injected into the wart.

If you have diabetes, peripheral arterial disease, a weakened immune system, or a major illness, talk to your doctor before you use any over-the-counter wart removal products. You may not be able to use them.

The decision to treat your warts is up to you. But you might think about the cost and the time needed to treat them. In most cases, over-the-counter products you can use at home work as well as treatments done in your doctor's office. These home treatments cost less, cause little or no pain, and have a low risk of side effects or scarring. But they may take longer to work.

How well do these treatments work?

Treatments for warts don't always work. Even after warts shrink or go away, they may come back or spread to other parts of your body. This is because most treatments destroy the wart but don't
kill the virus that causes it.

Studies suggest that:

- Salicylic acid is safe and can get rid of warts in up to 75 out of 100 people who use it. This means that as many as 25 out of 100 people still have warts after treatment.\(^1\) By comparison, a placebo (a medicine that has no active ingredients in it) can get rid of warts in 50 out of 100 people.
- There is currently no proof that cryotherapy is any more effective than salicylic acid.\(^2\)

Other treatments may not work any better than salicylic acid or cryotherapy. You may need to try several different treatments to find one that works for you.

**What are the side effects of treatment?**

Side effects depend on the type of treatment. But some can cause:

- Skin irritation, burning, and blistering.
- Pain.
- Scarring.
- Infection.
- Nerve damage.

**Why might your doctor recommend treatment for warts?**

Your doctor might suggest that you treat your warts if:

- You have a wart that is getting worse and is easily irritated.
- You have a plantar wart that hurts to walk on.
- You don't like the way your wart looks.
- You are worried that your wart might spread to other people or other parts of your body.

### 2. Compare your options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is usually involved?</th>
<th>Treat your warts</th>
<th>Don't treat your warts</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• If you have diabetes, peripheral arterial disease, a weakened immune system, or a major illness, talk to your doctor before you use any over-the-counter wart removal products. You may not be able to use them. • You'll need to do different things depending on the</td>
<td>• You wait and see if your warts go away on their own. • You take steps to prevent warts from spreading. For example: ◦ Cover your warts with a bandage or athletic tape. ◦ Don't walk barefoot on warm, moist surfaces. ◦ Don't share towels,</td>
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</table>
treatment you choose.

- **Salicylic acid**: You put the medicine on your warts every day for 2 to 3 months. You can do this at home, and you don't need a prescription.
- **Duct tape**: You cover your warts with tape for 6 days. Then you remove the tape and soak the warts in water. You may have to repeat these steps for up to 2 months. You can buy duct tape at a grocery store or hardware store.
- **Cryotherapy**: You can first try an over-the-counter medicine that can freeze your warts. Each treatment takes only a few seconds. Or you can have your doctor freeze the warts for you using a very cold liquid. You'll need to have this done at least once every 1 to 3 weeks until the warts are gone.
- **Retinoid**: You put the medicine on your warts every day until they are gone. You can do this at home, but you'll need a prescription.
- **Electrosurgery**: Your doctor numbs the area around your warts and then sends an electrical charge through the tip of a needle to burn off your warts.
- **Curettage**: Your doctor numbs the area around your warts and then cuts them off with a sharp knife or spoon-shaped razors, or other personal items.
Laser surgery: Your doctor uses a laser or an intense beam of light to burn off your warts.

| What are the benefits? | • You may get rid of your warts sooner than if you wait for them to go away on their own.  
|                       | • The success rate depends on what type of treatment you choose. About 65 to 85 out of 100 people may see their warts go away with treatment.  
|                       | • You prevent your warts from spreading to other people or other parts of your body.  
|                       | • You have less pain if the warts are in a spot that you put a lot of pressure on, such as on your finger or the bottom of your foot.  
| What are the risks and side effects? | • Possible side effects include:  
|                       |   ◦ Skin irritation, burning, and blistering.  
|                       |   ◦ Pain.  
|                       |   ◦ Scarring.  
|                       |   ◦ Infection.  
|                       |   ◦ Nerve damage.  
|                       | • Treatment may not work. Warts may come back.  
|                       | • You avoid the side effects of treatment.  
|                       | • You avoid the cost and inconvenience of getting treatment.  
|                       | • If your warts don't go away on their own, or if they spread to other parts of your body or cause pain, you can decide to try treatment.  
|                       | • If you don't treat your warts, they:  
|                       |   ◦ Might not go away on their own.  
|                       |   ◦ Might get worse and cause pain.  
|                       |   ◦ Might spread to other people or other parts of your body.  

Personal stories

Are you interested in what others decided to do? Many people have faced this decision. These personal stories may help you decide.

Personal stories about deciding to treat warts

These stories are based on information gathered from health professionals and consumers. They may be helpful as you make important health decisions.
"My 12-year-old son Jeff has warts on several of his fingers. They don't seem to bother him too much, but his sister thinks they are "gross." I think he doesn't want to do anything about them because he likes to tease her. I asked our doctor if there was any reason to treat them. He said there really wasn't and that Jeff would probably outgrow them as he gets older. Our doctor also said to keep in mind that warts are contagious, and Jeff's sister might catch them too."

— Kevin, age 40

"At first I didn't know what the growth on my toe was. I never had warts when I was a kid. But when I kept stubbing it on things and making it bleed, I decided I should probably do something about it. So one day when I was seeing my doctor for something else, I asked her to take a look at it. She said it was definitely a wart and "I can freeze it off right now if you don't mind a little pain, or you can try a nonprescription product that will take longer." I knew I wouldn't stick with the home treatment for more than a few days, so I agreed to the freezing."

— Leslie, age 22

"I was nervous about doing anything like freezing or surgery to the bottom of my foot. I'm on my feet all day at work, and I hated to take a day or two off just to have a wart treated. But my plantar wart was sort of nagging me, so I used a nonprescription product, pads, and a pumice stone for several weeks. It was a slow process, but it gave me an excuse to spend a few minutes in the bathroom by myself every night!"

— Claire, age 50

"Some people think that warts are no big deal, but the warts on my feet have caused all sorts of grief. I've had them burned off and frozen off, tried home treatments, even tried the old banana peel remedy, and they just keep coming back. I know they aren't going to kill me, but they sure are a pain in the neck—make that a pain in the foot! I'm ready to try some injections that the doctor says may work. I have to have them once a week for a couple of months."

— LaMar, age 45

3. What matters most to you?

Your personal feelings are just as important as the medical facts. Think about what matters most to you in this decision, and show how you feel about the following statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons to treat warts</th>
<th>Reasons not to treat warts</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I want to do whatever I can to get rid of my warts.</td>
<td>I want to wait and see if my warts go away on their own.</td>
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More important | Equally important | More important
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I don't like the way my warts look.</th>
<th>My warts don't bother me.</th>
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<tr>
<td>More important</td>
<td>Equally important</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I want to prevent my warts from spreading to other people or other parts of my body.</td>
<td>I'm not worried about my warts spreading to other people or other parts of my body.</td>
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<td>More important</td>
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<tr>
<td>My warts are in a spot where they cause pain.</td>
<td>My warts don't hurt.</td>
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<td>More important</td>
<td>Equally important</td>
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<td>My other important reasons:</td>
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</table>
4. Where are you leaning now?

Now that you've thought about the facts and your feelings, you may have a general idea of where you stand on this decision. Show which way you are leaning right now.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treating my warts</th>
<th>NOT treating my warts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leaning toward</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leaning toward</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. What else do you need to make your decision?

Check the facts

1. Are warts harmful?
   - Yes
   - No
   - I'm not sure

   That's right. Warts are usually harmless. In most cases, they go away on their own within months or years.

2. If warts are bothersome, should they be treated?
   - Yes
   - No
   - I'm not sure

   That's right. If warts spread or cause pain, or if you don't like the way they look, you may want to treat them.

3. Do treatments for warts always work?
   - Yes
   - No
   - I'm not sure

   That's right. Treatments for warts don't always work. Warts may come back in the same place or on a different part of your body.

Decide what's next
1. Do you understand the options available to you?
   - Yes
   - No

2. Are you clear about which benefits and side effects matter most to you?
   - Yes
   - No

3. Do you have enough support and advice from others to make a choice?
   - Yes
   - No

Certainty

1. How sure do you feel right now about your decision?

   Not sure at all  |  Somewhat sure  |  Very sure

2. Check what you need to do before you make this decision.
   - I'm ready to take action.
   - I want to discuss the options with others.
   - I want to learn more about my options.

3. Use the following space to list questions, concerns, and next steps.

Credits and References

Credits

By             Healthwise Staff
Primary Medical Reviewer  Patrice Burgess, MD - Family Medicine
Specialist Medical Reviewer  E. Gregory Thompson, MD - Internal Medicine

References
Citations


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