

WARTS

What are warts?

Warts are caused by a viral infection in the top layer of the skin.

Why do some people get warts and others don't?

Some people get warts depending on how often they are exposed to the virus. Wart viruses occur more easily if the skin has been damaged in some way, which explains the high frequency of warts in children who bite their nails or pick at hangnails. Some people are just more likely to catch the wart virus than others, just as some people catch colds very easily. Patients with a weakened immune system also are more prone to a wart virus infection.

Do warts need to be treated?

In children, warts can disappear without treatment over a period of several months to years. However, warts that are bothersome, painful, or rapidly multiplying should be treated. Warts in adults often do not disappear as easily or as quickly as they do in children.

How do dermatologists treat warts?

The standard by which all other treatments are compared is liquid nitrogen. Liquid nitrogen is sprayed on the skin and over the course of a week causes a blister to form beneath the wart. When the blister falls off, part or all of the wart goes with it. It clears warts better than any treatment option that is available. It usually takes more than one treatment to clear an individual wart so you will need to be seen every 3 weeks. The problem with liquid nitrogen is that it can be quite painful.

Laser treatment can also be used. It works in a similar manner to liquid nitrogen. Studies have **not** proven that laser is more effective than liquid nitrogen and it tends to be more painful than liquid nitrogen.

Applying a very high concentration of acid every 3 weeks is another treatment option. Since it does not typically work as well as liquid nitrogen, this would probably be a 2nd line treatment if you did not respond to liquid nitrogen or if you could not tolerate liquid nitrogen treatments.

Cantharidin can be applied to the skin in Dr. Pena's office. It also causes a blister to form under the wart. Applying Cantharidin is usually not painful but one of the least effective treatment options. Of concern is that on occasion a ring of warts can appear surrounding the initial wart that was treated with Cantharidin. Cantharidin also needs to be applied every 3 weeks.

Immunotherapy (Squaric acid) is a treatment method that is meant to activate your immune system to help fight off the wart. It is not as effective at clearing warts as is liquid nitrogen and takes more effort and patience from the patient's perspective. It is recommended for patients who cannot tolerate liquid nitrogen treatments or for patients whose warts have failed to clear after multiple treatments with liquid nitrogen or the acid. Squaric acid is applied to your arm and you return to the office one week later to verify that your immune system mounted a response. Thereafter, you are instructed how to apply the squaric acid at home. You return to the office 6 weeks later and if there was no response, the concentration is increased.

Another at home method that works on your immune system is Aldara cream. This method requires nightly and daily care of the wart. You would need to soak the wart in water, file the surface of the wart, and apply Aldara followed by duck tape each night.

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In deciding what treatment is best for you, you need to consider 3 factors: 1) How quickly do you want the wart gone? 2) How much pain are you able to tolerate in getting rid of the wart? 3) How much time you want to put into caring for the wart at home?

If you are willing to tolerate the pain and want the wart gone as soon as possible then liquid nitrogen is for you. If you are not in a hurry to get rid of the wart and don't want to deal with it at home and can come every 3 weeks to the office then acid or Cantharone may be for you. If you don't mind caring for the wart on a daily basis at home, for an extended period of time, then squaric acid or Aldara could be your best treatment options.

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