

Plantar Wart

What are Plantar Warts?

Warts are one of several soft tissue conditions of the foot that can be quite painful. They are caused by a virus, which generally invades the skin through small or invisible cuts and abrasions. They can appear anywhere on the skin, but technically only those on the sole are properly called plantar warts.

Children, especially teenagers, tend to be more susceptible to warts than adults; some people seem to be immune.

Identification Problems

Most warts are harmless, even though they may be painful. They are often mistaken for corns or calluses—which are layers of dead skin that build up to protect an area which is being continuously irritated. The wart, however, is a viral infection.

It is also possible for a variety of more serious lesions to appear on the foot, including malignant lesions such as carcinomas and melanomas. Although rare, these conditions can sometimes be misidentified as a wart. It is wise to consult a podiatric physician when any suspicious growth or eruption is detected on the skin of the foot in order to ensure a correct diagnosis.

Plantar warts tend to be hard and flat, with a rough surface and well-defined boundaries; warts are generally raised and fleshier when they appear on the top of the foot or on the toes. Plantar warts are often gray or brown (but the color may vary), with a center that appears as one or more pinpoint of black. It is important to note that warts can be very resistant to treatment and have a tendency to reoccur.

Source of the Virus

The plantar wart is often contracted by walking barefoot on dirty surfaces or littered ground where the virus is lurking. The causative virus thrives in warm, moist environments, making infection a common occurrence in communal bathing facilities.

If left untreated, warts can grow to an inch or more in circumference and can spread into clusters of several warts; these are often called mosaic warts. Like any other infectious lesion, plantar warts are spread by touching, scratching, or even by contact with skin shed from another wart. The wart may also bleed, another route for spreading.

Occasionally, warts can spontaneously disappear after a short time, and, just as frequently, they can recur in the same location.

When plantar warts develop on the weight-bearing areas of the foot—the ball of the foot, or the heel, for example—they can be the source of sharp, burning pain. Pain occurs when weight is brought to bear directly on the wart, although pressure on the side of a wart can create equally intense pain.

Tips for Prevention

- Avoid walking barefoot, except on sandy beaches.
- Change shoes and socks daily.
- Keep feet clean and dry.
- Check children's feet periodically.
- Avoid direct contact with warts—from other persons or from other parts of the body.
- Do not ignore growths on, or changes in, your skin.
- Visit your podiatric physician as part of your annual health checkup.

Self Treatment

Self treatment is generally not advisable. Over-the-counter preparations contain acids or chemicals that destroy skin cells, and it takes an expert to destroy abnormal skin cells (warts) without also destroying surrounding healthy tissue. Self treatment with such medications especially should be avoided by people with diabetes and those with cardiovascular or circulatory disorders. Never use them in the presence of an active infection.

Professional Treatment

It is possible that your podiatric physician will prescribe and supervise your use of a wart-removal preparation. More likely, however, removal of warts by a simple surgical procedure, performed under local anesthetic, may be indicated.

Lasers have become a common and effective treatment. A procedure known as CO₂ laser cautery is performed under local anesthesia either in your podiatrist's office surgical setting or an outpatient surgery facility. The laser reduces post-treatment scarring and is a safe form for eliminating wart lesions.

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Tips for Individuals with Warts

- Avoid self treatment with over-the-counter preparations.
- Seek professional podiatric evaluation and assistance with the treatment of your warts.
- Diabetics and other patients with circulatory, immunological, or neurological problems should be especially careful with the treatment of their warts.
- Warts may spread and are catching. Make sure you have your warts evaluated to protect yourself and those close to you.

What is a Plantar Wart?

A wart is a small growth on the skin that develops when the skin is infected by a virus. Warts can develop anywhere on the foot, but typically they appear on the bottom (plantar side) of the foot. Plantar warts most commonly occur in children, adolescents, and the elderly.

There are two types of plantar warts:

- A solitary wart is a single wart. It often increases in size and may eventually multiply, forming additional “satellite” warts.
- Mosaic warts are a cluster of several small warts growing closely together in one area. Mosaic warts are more difficult to treat than solitary warts.

Signs and Symptoms

The signs and symptoms of a plantar wart may include:

- Thickened skin. Often a plantar wart resembles a callus because of its tough, thick tissue.
- Pain. A plantar wart usually hurts during walking and standing, and there is pain when the sides of the wart are squeezed.
- Tiny black dots. These often appear on the surface of the wart. The dots are actually dried blood contained in the infected capillaries (tiny blood vessels).

Plantar warts grow deep into the skin. Usually this growth occurs slowly—the wart starts off small and gets larger over time.

What Causes a Plantar Wart?

Plantar warts are caused by direct contact with the human papilloma virus (HPV). This is the same virus that causes warts on other areas of the body. Typically, the plantar wart virus is acquired in public places where people go barefoot, such as locker rooms, swimming pools, and karate classes. It can also be acquired at home if other family members have the virus.

Diagnosis and Treatment

To diagnose a plantar wart, the foot and ankle surgeon will examine the patient’s foot and look for signs and symptoms of a wart.

Although plantar warts may eventually clear up on their own, most patients desire faster relief. The goal of treatment is to completely remove the wart.

The foot and ankle surgeon may use topical or oral treatments, laser therapy, cryotherapy (freezing), or surgery to remove the wart.

Regardless of the treatment approaches undertaken, it is important that the patient follow the surgeon’s instructions, including all home care and medication that has been prescribed, as well as follow-up visits with the surgeon. Warts may return, requiring further treatment.

If there is no response to treatment, further diagnostic evaluation may be necessary. In such cases, the surgeon can perform a biopsy to rule out other potential causes for the growth.

Although there are many folk remedies for warts, patients should be aware that these remain unproven and may be dangerous. Patients should never try to remove a wart themselves—this can do more harm than good.