

NHS Forth Valley
Dermatology Department

Seborrhoeic Warts

Patient Information

A decorative graphic at the bottom of the page consisting of a light blue background with a darker blue wavy shape that resembles a stylized wave or a ribbon, extending across the width of the page.

What are the aims of this leaflet?

This leaflet has been written to help you understand more about seborrhoeic warts. It tells you what they are, what causes them, what can be done about them, and where you can find out more about them.

What are seborrhoeic warts?

Seborrhoeic warts are also known as seborrhoeic keratoses and as basal cell papillomas. The term 'senile wart' has now been dropped as it offended many patients. Seborrhoeic warts are harmless growths on the skin, which are very common in the elderly. They are often pigmented.

What causes seborrhoeic warts?

Despite their name, seborrhoeic warts are nothing to do with sebaceous glands or viral warts. They are benign growths due to a build up of ordinary skin cells. They are strongly age-related. They usually start to appear after the age of 40 years, and most old people will have at least a few seborrhoeic warts: some will have large numbers. They are not infectious and do not become malignant.

Are seborrhoeic warts hereditary?

Seborrhoeic warts can run in families and this suggests a genetic basis for them.

What are the symptoms of seborrhoeic warts?

Seborrhoeic warts are harmless, but can be a considerable nuisance. They can itch, become inflamed, and catch on clothing. Many people dislike the look of them, particularly when they come up on the face.

What do seborrhoeic warts look like?

Small flat seborrhoeic warts can often be seen in middle age, and they become more raised and larger as the years go by. Their size varies from less

than one centimetre to several centimetres across. Seborrhoeic warts have a rough surface, and range in colour from a light brown to almost black. They give the impression that they are stuck onto the surface of the skin. Some look like small pigmented skin tags. Seborrhoeic warts occur most often on the trunk but are also common on the head and neck. Their numbers vary: one person may have just one seborrhoeic wart; others have hundreds of them. Once present, they usually stay, and new ones often appear over the years.

How are seborrhoeic warts diagnosed?

Seborrhoeic warts are much more common than skin cancers such as melanomas, and they are usually easy to recognise. Nevertheless, it is important that a doctor checks any doubtful pigmented lump to make sure that the right diagnosis is made. A very dark seborrhoeic wart can look rather like a melanoma; others can cause worry by becoming inflamed or bleeding. If there is any doubt at all, part of the presumed seborrhoeic wart should be sent to the laboratory for examination under the microscope.

Can seborrhoeic warts be cured?

Yes, by dealing with them in the ways listed below.

How can seborrhoeic warts be treated?

Seborrhoeic warts are so common that it would be impossible to treat them all routinely. Most need no treatment anyway - people accept them as a harmless accompaniment of getting older.

- The application of creams will not clear seborrhoeic warts, although moisturisers help to decrease itching and make the seborrhoeic warts feel less rough.
- General practitioners or dermatologists can remove seborrhoeic warts, either by freezing them with liquid nitrogen (cryotherapy) or scraping them off (curettage) under a local anaesthetic. These procedures are usually restricted to seborrhoeic warts that are persistently troublesome.

What can I do?

Always contact your doctor if you are worried about a pigmented spot that is changing in any way.

Where can I get more information?

Web link to detailed leaflet: www.dermnetnz.org/dna.sk/sk.html
Adapted from BAD Patient information leaflet

While every effort has been made to ensure that the information given in this leaflet is accurate, not every treatment will be suitable or effective for every person. Your own doctor will be able to advise in greater detail.

Patient Appointments/Cancellations

If you have an enquiry about an appointment or would like to cancel it, please call 01324 566249 or email: FV-UHB.RTT@nhs.net

If you can't go let us know!

Every month around 2,000 people across Forth Valley fail to turn up for hospital appointments. This costs the NHS millions of pounds each year and increases waiting times. So if you are unable to attend or no longer require your hospital appointment please let us know so we can offer it to someone else.

We are happy to consider requests for this publication in other languages or formats such as large print. Please call 01324 590886 (24hrs), fax 01324 590867 or email FV-UHB.disabilitydepartment@nhs.net

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