

DERMATOLOGY DIRECTORATE

PATIENT INFORMATION

Seborrhoeic Warts (also known as Seborrhoeic Keratosis and Basal Cell Papilloma)

What are seborrhoeic warts?

Seborrhoeic warts are also known as seborrhoeic keratoses and as basal cell papillomas. In the past they were often called 'senile warts' but this term 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 a different colour to your skin (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, 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 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 (1/2 inch) 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 wart would 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 addition of getting older.

Applying creams will not clear seborrhoeic warts, although moisturisers help to reduce itching and make the seborrhoeic warts feel less rough.

GP's or dermatologists can remove seborrhoeic warts, either by freezing them with liquid nitrogen (cryotherapy) or scraping them off (curettage) under 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 about seborrhoeic warts?

www.dermnetnz.org/dna.sk.html.