

## Verrucae

### What are Verrucae?

Verrucae are warts that can be found anywhere on the foot, but commonly occur on the soles of the feet. They can also be found round the edges of nails. They are caused by the *human papilloma virus (HPV)* and are passed from person to person. There are over 100 types of HPV. The virus is thought to thrive in moist, damp environments such as swimming pools, changing room floors and communal shower areas. If an infected foot deposits skin cells onto the floor then it is possible to walk across the same floor and pick up the virus, especially if your skin is cut or scratched.

### Are Verrucae serious?

They are harmless, but in some circumstances they develop on a weight-bearing area of the foot where they are likely to be painful. In these areas callus (hard skin) can also form over the top of the verruca, increasing the discomfort. Some strains of Verrucae spread very quickly and can become unsightly.

### Who gets Verrucae?

Verrucae are most commonly seen in children, teenagers and young adults - basically those who use communal changing rooms. In time, immunity may develop against the verruca virus but some people do remain more susceptible than others.

### How do I know I have a verruca?

The classic appearance is cauliflower-like, sometimes containing small black dots which are caused by small blood vessels leaking blood into the verruca. They can vary in size and number. An early-stage verruca can look like a small discoloured skin blemish and can easily be mistaken for a corn. Sometimes a verruca can quickly spread into a cluster made up of many tiny Verrucae. A simple diagnostic test is to pinch the skin (like you would squeeze a spot) where you think you may have a verruca. If it hurts, you may have a verruca, since corns tend not to hurt when pinched but do hurt if you press them. Pressing a verruca is generally painless.

### How do I treat my verruca?

Evidence has shown that, in many cases, Verrucae can disappear of their own accord within 2 years and therefore, if the verruca is painless, no treatment is required. The body's defence mechanism, the immune system, will recognize the *HP* virus and fight the infection. Due to the nature of this virus this can take many months to happen. Letting nature heal the verruca is the best and safest course of action.

For painful, unsightly Verrucae, or ones which are spreading, you may choose to self treat or seek professional help from a podiatrist. This can often be a slow and frustrating process and, unfortunately, there is still a 15% chance of re-infection. Should you self-treat, evidence has shown that ointments and gels containing salicylic acid are the most effective. Sometimes, just by rubbing away the dry skin over the verruca and applying a plaster can stimulate the body's immune system to fight the infection.

**Never** self-treat if you have diabetes, poor circulation, are pregnant or have any other conditions affecting the health of your feet: if you do have diabetes check with your pharmacist or a podiatrist before self-treating.

## What happens if I decide to seek treatment?

The podiatrist will carry out an assessment of your general health before deciding on a treatment plan. At The Foot Shop we offer a variety of possible treatments, depending upon the location of the verruca and the circumstances of the patient - diabetics, epileptics or patients with poor circulation.

- **Acid based treatments:** These involve ointments or liquids containing acids, which are usually stronger than over-the-counter preparations, and are applied to the verruca. The acids act by carefully and gently destroying the very surface of the skin that the virus has infected. The podiatrist will apply the treatment to the skin and thereafter, at weekly intervals, remove the overlying skin that has been destroyed and re-apply the ointment or oil. Immediately after the treatment the foot needs to be kept dry for three to five days.
- **Cryotherapy:** This involves freezing the verruca with liquid nitrogen or nitrous oxide gas. This needs to be done at approximately three-weekly intervals over a few months before the verruca is fully healed. This treatment does lead to soreness and blistering in some patients and it is not advised for sensitive or anxious children. You can still swim during this course of treatment.
- **Falknor's Needling for Verrucae:** Falknor's needling procedure is an innovative and effective treatment for Verrucae. It is a form of soft tissue therapy which is intended to break down the verruca and create a controlled inflammatory response. This response stimulates the body's immune system to recognise the virus and destroy it. The treatment was first described in an American medical journal in 1969 and has been used internationally since then, with great success.

Needling is different from most other treatments in that it only requires one, or at most, two, treatments to be effective. Other treatments, such as caustics, can require many applications to be effective. This makes needling an ideal treatment for busy people. 24 hours after treatment you can shower as normal, without the need to keep bulky dressings dry and, after 2 days, no dressings are required at all.

The treatment works by puncturing the verruca a number of times with a sterile needle. This exposes the viral particles to the fatty tissue beneath the skin, an area rich in immune regulators. In this area the body's immune system can recognize the virus and destroy it. Because this immune response is normally systemic, only one verruca needs to be treated, even where there are

a number of lesions. Spontaneous remission normally occurs in all, or most, verrucae at the same time.

The procedure is carried out painlessly under a local anaesthetic. Mild soreness the following day has been reported by a few patients, though most feel no discomfort at all.

### What if the treatment doesn't work?

Sometimes, even with a course of treatment, a verruca might not resolve. This could be due, in part, to your system not recognizing the virus and, therefore, not triggering the immune system. In this situation it is advisable to discontinue treatment, but to continue rubbing the verruca with pumice stone or an emery board. Evidence has shown that even the most stubborn of Verrucae do heal eventually, but may take more than four years to do so.

### Can I avoid catching Verrucae?

You can minimize the chances of catching Verrucae by keeping your feet in a healthy condition. Use creams and lotions if your skin is dry and use surgical spirit if your feet are excessively sweaty. Treat other conditions such as Athlete's Foot, which can damage the skin's surface, wear flipflops in communal changing areas and never share towels. Verruca socks can help to avoid passing on the virus and can also be worn as a preventive measure.