

Canine Warts

Canine warts are benign growths encountered commonly in our companion dogs. They are small (1/2 to 5 cm) circular, “cauliflower-like” bumps found anywhere on the body. They sometimes start as small, pale and smooth, and grow to become lumpy. They look very similar to the warts that we get as humans, but are not contagious to us. They are actually caused by a virus specific to dogs called *Papillomavirus*. There are several subtypes of this virus that are found naturally occurring. In dogs, there are 2 basic scenarios in which we find warts. One is in any age dog (but mostly older dogs) where the head, feet, eyelids and anywhere else on the body can be affected. The warts are usually small and solitary. The second is a highly contagious form in younger dogs (usually less than 2 years old), where the mouth, eyelids (and sometimes, genitalia) are affected. In this form, there are usually many warts affecting the same area. For example, they are often found grouped on the inner lips of puppies on routine examination. While they can sometimes be shocking and unsightly to an unsuspecting pet owner, they are benign and usually don't bother the pet at all. Amazingly enough, they often go away (regress) on their own after several months. Once the puppy's immune system develops and the tumors regress, they are immune for life to re-infection with the virus. Because it can take months for the tumors to go away, some pet owners have the lumps surgically removed. This is usually curative depending on the stage of infection (for example, early in infection, new warts can occur after some are removed).

The virus that causes warts is widespread in nature and is very stable (can live a long time) without a host. Once a pet is exposed to the virus, it can take 1-2 months before the warts actually develop. There is no good vaccine to prevent infection. Because the form in young dogs is so contagious, any pet having warts in social body contact areas (specifically, the mouth) should be kept apart from playmates until several weeks after the warts are gone (think: chicken pox in children). Remember that a veterinarian should examine any growth on your pet. The veterinarian should be able to give you an idea on the infectious nature of the growth or the type of growth it is. Often, this is done only through biopsy or cytology of the growth. To make matters a little confusing, there are several benign growths that occur in dogs that look very similar to warts.

Sometimes, for simplicity sake (and because most people are familiar with the term), a veterinarian may refer to these growths as “warts” even though they may not be the same growth caused by the *Papillomavirus*.