

WARTS AND ALL

JULIA DEAKIN
*decides to stop
ignoring her least
favourite thing.*

Sitting on my left forefinger is something that's fought harder for my attention than any other subject in the last few years. OK wart, you win.

If you've never had a wart of any kind (or a verruca — same thing on the sole of your foot) don't imagine you are somehow immune. You are in fact more likely to have this treat in store than the rest of us who, having seen one lot off, acquire some resistance.

All warts, whether on your hands, feet, face or genital area, are the result of viral infection. They are not caught from handling toads, but from direct contact with someone else's wart or possibly from damp towels or the damp floors of a bathroom or swimming pool. Children are especially prone, but most people get them at some stage. You won't know you've got it at first, because warts take from six weeks to 20 months to incubate. It will then just sit there — or produce a little colony around the area of skin it's occupying.

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Mine first appeared some three years ago as an irritating little blob about the size of a pinhead. Gradually it enlarged, spread and hardened, until about twelve months later I finally recognised the tough, cauliflowery lump for what it was and had to start looking at myself wart and all.

Where had it come from? How had this being, which seemed to have a life of its own, got into me? And more to the point, when would it go? I pushed and pulled, but felt that somehow I was only provoking it to more vigorous growth.

Warts are a relatively minor

event on the geological time scale, but they are still a bit of a medical enigma. "A small round dry tough excrescence on skin caused by abnormal growth of papillae ("small nipple-like protuberance in a part or organ") and thickening of epidermis over them," says the encyclopaedia — and the medical textbooks don't have much more to add.

"Abnormal growth" sounds ominous, especially as I've heard that cancer of the cervix is linked to the penis or cervical wart virus and my specimen, presumably, is also a wart virus. Yet the doctor assures me that it's not the same. If I had genital warts, or sexual contact with someone who had, they would need professional treatment and I would be offered regular cervical smears.

Verrucas on feet can be frozen, burned off with acid or scraped out: it's worth it because these can become painful (the pressure on your foot forces it underground and it becomes an implanted or "planter" wart). If you get a wart on your face you can also probably get it treated. But warts on your hands, whether flat or raised, are more or less harmless.

But of course I want it removed. Particularly as it seems so determined to stay. So from the chemist I buy a bottle of lethal-sounding salicylic acid which if misapplied, the instructions tell me, will gouge a huge crater in the non-warty skin. Carefully and painlessly, however, I shed layer after layer of the offending object until I reach the bottom of the jar. Not, alas, the bottom of the wart. Three cubic centimetres of acid have removed, at most, three cubic millilitres of skin. Perhaps another gallon or so would do it.

Spurges have no effect either. Innocuous-looking plants with pretty yellow flowers and a caustic sap, they are commonly found near old walls. I've seen the sap devour a friend's verruca on a camping holiday — a spectacle which completely eclipsed the splendour of the Pyrenees. But nothing doing for me.

So what else is there? Well, there's plenty of folklore on the subject. I'm not at all surprised to learn, for instance, that because warts are so stubborn they have long been associated with the devil who, according to 15th and 16th century witch hunters, left his warty mark on accomplices to prove their guilt. There are a host of supernatural "cures" based on this theory, which make extensive use of midnight, full moons, mirrors and deserted crossroads.

Well, I've tried spitting on it and telling it firmly to go away which is the method my piano teacher swears by. "But it will only work if you really mean it," she says. I did, and it didn't — but it might for you.

You can also try garrotting it with a silk thread (a new image for cigarette ads?) or a horse hair. If you're losing sleep over it you can get up at midnight and bathe it in stump water or dandelion juice, or make faces in the mirror at yourself — and the devil within you.

No luck? Give it a day or two, then try the kitchen. In line with current thinking, this seems a rich source of killers. Castor oil, soda, cheese, a mixture of lard and salt, a slice of apple, the inside of a bean pod: these are all supposed to be death to warts. Thatcherites with friends will on the other hand be keen to sell

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off their warts: for a token sum their friend can "buy" them and escape affliction themselves. As long as they don't touch their new acquisition.

Still there? Try a piece of pig's fat — stolen, of course — and hang it on the washing line until it rots. Or a hazel stick carved with a notch for each wart and wrapped in a parcel: whoever picks it up does so warts and all.

If you try enough of these wheezes, but equally if you leave a wart to its own devices, it will eventually go, maybe next week or next year but almost certainly before the next

century (few last longer than ten years, you'll be pleased to hear). The body's own defences are still the only adversaries that can kill warts painlessly and without trace.

Ten years may seem a long time to wait even by over-worked, underfunded NHS standards, but cutting may actually spread the virus to new tissue while other methods will only remove the hard skin to give your immune system a chance to overwhelm the rest. The wart may still grow back, however, and even if it doesn't you could end up with a scar instead.

So if you can resist the temptation to use force on your unwelcome squatter, let it stay. If you can't stand it and you're willing to pay, your best bet might actually be hypnosis. Even the medical experts grudgingly admit that this has a pretty good track record. So does "suggestion therapy" which is supposed to rout about a third of the warts it's tried on and is a modern version of crossroads at midnight. Whatever you do, or don't do, one day your wart will disappear and you'll never really know why.■

ANTI-NATAL?

Pre-natal — or even pre-conceptual — diagnosis is once again a hot political topic with the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill going through Parliament. But for the individual woman who is pregnant, all this abstract debate is no help in understanding the different tests which are now available. For this we need to turn to some of the books published recently on this topic.

Anne Charlish's book *Birth-tech* (Christopher Helm, £4.95) is a very useful guide to the gamut of tests a pregnant woman may be offered, from simple blood tests at the first ante-natal visit right up to foetal monitoring during the birth. Be warned, though: Anne is a total technology enthusiast, so those with a more critical attitude towards "birth-tech" may find her book annoying. But her descriptions of each test are much more detailed and informative than those in a more critical book by Beverley Beech, *Who's Having Your Baby?* (Camden, £4.95).