CONDITION

Molluscum contagiosum

Molluscum contagiosum is a contagious viral skin condition that causes small, smooth, dimpled bumps.

WHAT IT IS
Contagious viral skin condition causing small raised bumps

BODY SYSTEM
Skin

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Smooth bumps, central dimples, itching, surrounding eczema

WHAT CAUSES IT
Molluscum contagiosum virus infection

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Skin examination; biopsy only when uncertain

MAIN TREATMENT
Observation or clinician-directed skin treatment

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes - immune system usually clears infection

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
No - usually suitable for routine care

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Usually clears completely, sometimes after several years

Overview

Molluscum contagiosum is a common viral skin condition. It causes small, firm bumps that often have a dimple in the centre. The bumps are called mollusca.

The condition is contagious, meaning it can pass from one person to another. It can also spread from one part of your body to another through scratching, shaving, or other skin contact.

Molluscum is most common in children, but teenagers and adults can also develop it. In adults, bumps around the genitals may be passed through sexual skin-to-skin contact. Genital molluscum in a child does not automatically mean sexual transmission; ordinary close contact and spread from another body area are possible.

Molluscum is usually harmless in people with a healthy immune system. Most cases clear

without treatment, although this often takes many months. Treatment may be considered when the bumps are uncomfortable, spreading, affecting daily life, or unlikely to clear easily.

Symptoms

Molluscum usually appears as a group of small bumps. They may develop anywhere on the skin, but the palms and soles are rarely affected.

Typical features include:

The bumps are often only a few millimetres wide. People with a weakened immune system can develop larger or more numerous bumps.

In children, common sites include the trunk, arms, legs, armpits, neck, and face. In adults, bumps may appear on the lower abdomen, inner thighs, buttocks, or genital area.

The skin around a bump may become red and swollen as the immune system starts clearing it. This does not always mean there is a bacterial infection. However, increasing pain, warmth, pus, spreading redness, or fever needs medical attention.

Molluscum near an eyelid can sometimes irritate the eye and cause conjunctivitis, which is inflammation of the eye's surface.

- Smooth, firm, dome-shaped bumps
- A small pit or dimple in the centre
- White, pink, flesh-coloured, or slightly darker colouring
- Itching, tenderness, or eczema around the bumps

Causes and risk factors

Molluscum is caused by the molluscum contagiosum virus, which belongs to the poxvirus family. It infects the outer layers of the skin.

The virus spreads through direct skin-to-skin contact. It may also spread through objects that have touched affected skin, such as towels, clothing, razors, or sports equipment. Scratching or shaving over the bumps can move the virus to nearby skin.

You are more likely to develop molluscum if you:

Adults can acquire molluscum during sexual contact when affected skin touches another person's skin. Condoms may reduce exposure but cannot fully prevent it because bumps may be outside the covered area.

The virus does not usually remain inactive in the body after the bumps have cleared. However, having molluscum once does not provide reliable lifelong immunity, so a new exposure can cause another infection.

- Are a young child
- Have eczema or damaged, itchy skin
- Have frequent close skin contact with other people
- Take part in contact sports
- Have an immune system weakened by a medical condition or treatment

Diagnosis

A healthcare professional can usually diagnose molluscum by examining the skin. The central dimple and smooth surface often make the bumps recognisable.

A magnifying device called a dermatoscope may be used for a closer look. Tests are not usually needed. If the appearance is unusual or the diagnosis remains uncertain, a small skin sample may be removed for examination under a microscope. This is called a biopsy.

Other skin conditions can resemble molluscum, including warts, inflamed hair follicles, and some harmless skin growths. Bumps on the genitals should be assessed if you are unsure what they are, because several infections and non-infectious conditions can look similar.

Extensive, unusually large, or persistent molluscum may lead to a discussion about immune health. This does not mean that everyone with many bumps has an immune problem.

Treatment and management

Many people do not need active treatment. In someone with a healthy immune system, allowing the bumps to clear naturally avoids the pain, skin irritation, and possible scarring caused by some treatments.

Treatment may be considered when the bumps:

A clinician can remove individual bumps by freezing them with liquid nitrogen or gently scraping them away. These procedures may be uncomfortable and can cause blistering, colour changes, or small scars. They are not always suitable for young children or for treating many bumps.

Topical treatments are applied directly to the skin. Some are designed to irritate or blister the

bump so that it separates from the skin. The choice depends on your age, the location and number of bumps, and which products are approved where you live. Some treatments must be applied by a healthcare professional.

Removing visible bumps does not guarantee that the condition has ended. Very small infected areas may not yet be visible, so new bumps can appear after treatment.

Do not squeeze, cut, burn, or pierce molluscum at home. This can spread the virus and increase the risk of infection and scarring. Products sold for ordinary warts may also irritate healthy skin and should not be used on the face or genitals without medical advice.

If eczema surrounds the bumps, treating the eczema can reduce itching and scratching. Regular moisturiser may help protect the skin. A healthcare professional can advise whether an anti-inflammatory eczema treatment is appropriate.

- Cause significant itching, irritation, or distress
- Are spreading quickly or repeatedly scratched
- Affect the eyelids or genital area
- Are complicated by severe eczema
- Persist because of a weakened immune system

Complications

Complications are uncommon, but molluscum can affect comfort and quality of life while it is present.

Scratching may cause bleeding, scarring, or spread to other areas. Broken skin can develop a bacterial infection. Signs include worsening pain, warmth, pus, or redness that continues to spread.

Eczema around the bumps can become widespread and very itchy. This can make molluscum harder to control because scratching transfers the virus.

Bumps close to an eye may cause persistent redness or irritation of the eye. Assessment is important because treatment around the eyelids needs particular care.

People with a severely weakened immune system may develop numerous, large, or long-lasting bumps. Treating the underlying immune problem, when possible, may help the skin clear. Specialist skin treatment may also be needed.

Temporary pale or dark marks can remain after a bump settles. Permanent scarring is possible but is more likely after repeated scratching, infection, or treatments that damage the skin.

Prevention

Molluscum cannot always be prevented. The bumps may be contagious before you recognise what they are, and close contact is common within households.

You can reduce spread by:

Do not share baths with other children while uncovered bumps are present. In pools, follow the facility's rules and use watertight coverings where possible. Avoid sharing kickboards, towels, or other items that rub against the skin.

Molluscum usually does not require exclusion from school or nursery. Covering visible bumps and avoiding shared personal items can reduce transmission.

- Avoiding scratching, picking, or shaving over the bumps
- Washing your hands after touching affected skin
- Keeping the bumps clean and covering them when practical
- Not sharing towels, razors, clothing, or personal sports equipment
- Covering bumps during close-contact sports
- Avoiding sexual skin contact when bumps are on or near the genitals

Living with it and what to expect

Individual bumps often last for weeks or months. New ones may appear as older ones disappear, so the whole episode lasts longer than a single bump.

In many people with a healthy immune system, molluscum clears within about 6 to 18 months. It can sometimes last for several years. This longer course does not necessarily mean that something is seriously wrong.

Once all bumps have gone, the skin usually returns to normal. Temporary changes in skin colour may be more noticeable in darker skin tones. Small scars can remain, especially if the bumps were picked, infected, or treated with a procedure.

You can usually continue school, work, exercise, and most everyday activities. Practical steps such as covering the bumps and not sharing towels help protect other people without requiring isolation.

Molluscum does not usually affect general health. It does not commonly cause fever, tiredness, or internal illness. If you have symptoms beyond the skin, another cause may need to be considered.

A weakened immune system can change the course. The bumps may be larger, more widespread, and slower to clear. Regular follow-up may then focus on both the skin and the reason for reduced immune function.

When to get medical help

Arrange a routine appointment if:

Seek prompt medical advice if the skin becomes increasingly painful, hot, swollen, or covered with pus, especially if redness is spreading or you have a fever. These changes may suggest a bacterial skin infection.

Prompt assessment is also appropriate for eye pain, sensitivity to light, persistent eye redness, or changes in vision.

Molluscum itself almost never needs emergency care. Seek emergency help if you become severely unwell, confused, faint, or develop rapidly spreading redness with fever, as these symptoms are not typical of uncomplicated molluscum.

- You are unsure whether the bumps are molluscum
- The bumps are on the eyelids or around the genitals
- Itching or eczema is disturbing sleep or daily activities
- The bumps are numerous, unusually large, or not improving over time
- You or your child keeps developing skin infections
- You have a condition or treatment that weakens the immune system
- You want to discuss treatment benefits, discomfort, and scarring risks

Common questions

Is molluscum contagiosum contagious?

Yes. It can spread through direct skin contact, shared personal items, and contact between affected and unaffected areas of your own skin. Covering bumps and avoiding scratching reduce the chance of spread.

How long does molluscum last?

Many cases clear within 6 to 18 months, but some last longer. New bumps may continue appearing while older ones heal. Treatment can remove particular bumps but may not stop hidden bumps from emerging.

Can my child go to school with molluscum?

Usually, yes. Children generally do not need to stay home from school or nursery. Visible bumps can be covered when practical, and towels, clothing, and other personal items should not be shared.

Is genital molluscum a sexually transmitted infection?

In adults, genital molluscum is often passed through sexual skin-to-skin contact. It may be reasonable to discuss testing for other sexually transmitted infections. Molluscum elsewhere on the body can spread to the genital area through touching or shaving.

Should I pop molluscum bumps?

No. Squeezing or piercing them can spread the virus, introduce bacteria, and cause scarring. If removal is appropriate, a healthcare professional can discuss safer methods.

Does molluscum leave scars?

Most bumps heal without permanent scars. Picking, bacterial infection, and some removal procedures increase the risk. Flat pale or dark marks may remain for a while after the bumps clear.

Sources

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