
What is Molluscum?

Molluscum contagiosum is a common and harmless viral infection of the skin. It is contagious (can be caught from another person by direct contact). About 8 in 10 cases occur in people under the age of 15. Most occur in children aged 1-4 years. It can occur however at any age.

It is more common in people who have atopic eczema (the type of eczema that runs in families together with asthma and hayfever). Sometimes people whose immune system is suppressed for any reason, such as taking immunosuppressive treatments may develop large numbers of molluscum contagiosum, but most people with molluscum contagiosum are perfectly healthy.

How is it passed on?

Molluscum contagiosum is caused by a virus that can be picked up through close personal contact with someone who has it, or from objects such as a shared flannel or a towel. The spots come up after a few weeks.

What are the symptoms?

Usually there are no symptoms, but the spots can be itchy or sore if they become inflamed or infected. They can bleed slightly if scratched.

The spots of molluscum contagiosum are easily recognised. They are:

- ❖ Small (from 2 to 6 mm. across): rarely they can grow larger than this
- ❖ Raised, and hemispherical (like a tiny dome), with a shiny surface
- ❖ Usually they are skin coloured
- ❖ Have a central pore containing a cheesy plug
- ❖ Sometimes areas of dry redness, rather like eczema, appear around the spots

There may be only one or two spots, and usually there are less than 20. They often occur in groups. A few people have more than a hundred spots; and this may hint that their immune system is not working well.

They should not be confused with warts, which have a rough surface and no central pore.

If a molluscum contagiosum spot becomes inflamed, it can look rather like a boil.

How should it be managed?

It usually goes away by itself, taking between 6 and 18 months to do so. However it can last for much longer than this. The spots often become red and inflamed just as they are about to go away, and can leave small depressed scars. For some people, the main concern is that the mollusca can look unsightly. However, most children are not bothered by it.

Treatment depends partly on the age of the person who has it. Many of the treatments are painful and often no treatment at all is needed since the spots can be expected to go away on their own. A child hurt by active treatment may be frightened of doctors for life.

If active treatment is needed, there are several possibilities:

- ❖ The spots can be frozen with liquid nitrogen (cryotherapy), at intervals of 3 weeks, until they are clear
- ❖ Some simple measures cause the spots to become inflamed and then to go away. These include squeezing the spots out with a pair of forceps, and piercing them with a small sharp stick. A local anaesthetic cream, applied to the area and left on under a plastic film for one hour before the procedure, will help to reduce the pain
- ❖ The spots can be scraped off with a sharp instrument (curettage). An eye specialist should deal with spots on the eyelids
- ❖ A cream containing a chemical that affects the immune system (imiquimod) has had some success, but should be avoided in pregnancy and only given under supervision of a dermatologist (skin specialist)

You should make every effort not to pass the infection on to others, particularly those in your family. Stick to your own towel, flannel and clothing. However children with molluscum contagiosum need not be kept off school, nor should they be barred from swimming, etc.

Need further advice or information?

- ❖ NHS Inform www.nhsinform.co.uk
- ❖ NHS24 ☎ 111 www.nhs24.co.uk
- ❖ www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk
- ❖ Local health clinic or GP

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