

Molluscum Contagiosum

Molluscum contagiosum is a skin disease caused by a poxvirus that causes clusters of tiny, firm, flesh-colored or pearly bumps. The infection is mainly spread by direct skin-to-skin contact. The bumps or lesions appear at the site of contact anywhere on the body except the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. Anyone can get molluscum contagiosum, but the vast majority of those who get it are children. Most people who get this condition are otherwise healthy. However, people with HIV or other immune-suppressing diseases are more likely to have particularly bad cases.



The only symptom of molluscum contagiosum is the tiny bumps on the skin. These flesh-colored or pearly growths look somewhat like tiny pimples with a central crater. A waxy substance may come out of the bumps when they are squeezed. In children, the bumps tend to appear on the face, arms, legs and middle of the body. In adults, molluscum contagiosum tends to appear on the genitals, thighs and lower abdomen because the infection can be spread through sexual contact as well as more casual physical contact. The bumps usually are grouped in one or two areas, but also can appear in many places on the body. Most people have fewer than 20 bumps. Some people may itch at the site of the lesions, but for most people the bumps cause no symptoms.



We can diagnose molluscum contagiosum by looking at the skin bumps. Individual bumps can last two to four months, but the disease can spread to other areas if the bumps come in contact with an uninfected area of skin, or if you touch a bump then touch an uninfected area. In most people, all lesions go away within six to nine months (though can last as long as 5 years). The only way to prevent molluscum contagiosum is to avoid close contact with people who have the disease. Molluscum contagiosum bumps never become cancerous.

Treatment is usually not necessary, because the infection typically heals on its own after several months. However, you or your child may want treatment to decrease the risk of infecting others and to improve appearance. The bumps can be removed by freezing them with liquid nitrogen, destroying them with acids or other caustic substances, or surgically scraping them off the skin. In some cases, however, these treatments can cause scarring or skin discoloration, which is why we generally leave them alone.

Improving personal hygiene should reduce transmission and autoinoculation of the virus. Be careful not to scratch it too much or it could get secondarily infected with other bacteria. It is not necessary to keep infected children out of school, although physical contact like wrestling and sharing of clothes and towels should be discouraged. Chlorine in swimming pools should kill the virus, but try to cover lesions and be conscious of items like kick boards and leg floats that could rub on a lesion. Sharing of baths should probably be avoided.

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