

Molluscum Contagiosum

A common skin disease, molluscum contagiosum is caused by a poxvirus that infects only the skin. This virus enters the skin through small breaks in the skin barrier. After an incubation period, growths appear. These growths can develop anywhere on the skin. Like warts, which are caused by a different virus, molluscum contagiosum is considered benign. Molluscum contagiosum does not affect any internal organs and rarely causes symptoms. As the name implies, molluscum contagiosum is contagious.

WHAT MOLLUSCUM CONTAGIOSUM LOOKS LIKE

Mollusca are usually small flesh-colored or pink dome-shaped growths that often become red or inflamed. They may appear shiny and have a small central indentation or white core. Because they can spread by skin-to-skin contact, mollusca are usually found in areas of skin that touch each other such as the folds in the arm or groin. They also are found in clusters on the chest, abdomen, and buttocks and can appear on the face and eyelids. Sometimes, the growths appear in a row.

In people who have a disease that weakens the immune system, the mollusca may be very large in size and number, especially on the face.

HOW MOLLUSCUM CONTAGIOSUM SPREADS

The virus spreads in three ways. As described above, a person who has molluscum contagiosum can spread the virus to other parts of the body. This may happen by rubbing or scratching a growth and then touching unaffected skin.

Molluscum contagiosum also spreads from person to person through direct skin-to-skin contact. And it is possible to get the disease by coming into contact with an object that has touched infected skin such as a towel, toy, or clothing. There have been reports of people contracting molluscum contagiosum from a swimming pool or gymnastic mat.

THOSE MOST AT RISK

Children tend to get molluscum more often than adults. It is common in young children who have not yet developed immunity to the virus. Children also tend to have more direct skin-to-skin contact with others.

Anyone who is exposed to the virus through skin-to-skin contact has an increased risk of developing molluscum contagiosum. This may happen by participating in a close contact sport such as wrestling or having sexual contact with an infected person. Living in a tropical area also increases the risk. The virus thrives in areas that are warm and humid. Certain medical conditions also make a person more susceptible. People who have atopic dermatitis or a disease that weakens the immune system are more likely to develop molluscum contagiosum.

TREATMENT

While molluscum contagiosum will eventually go away on its own without leaving a scar, many dermatologists advise treating. Treatment can prevent the growths from spreading to other areas of a patient's body and to other people.

Before treatment begins, a dermatologist may confirm that the growths are mollusca by scraping an area of infected skin and looking at the cells under a microscope. If molluscum contagiosum is present, there are a number of treatment options.

Treatment for mollusca is similar to that for warts. Growths can be frozen with liquid nitrogen, destroyed with various acids or blistering solutions, or treated with an electric needle (electrocautery) and scraped off with a sharp instrument (curette). Laser therapy also has been effective in treating mollusca. All of these treatments can be performed in a dermatologist's office. If there are many growths, treatment sessions may be needed every 3 to 6 weeks until the growths disappear. Some discomfort is associated with these treatments.

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Sometimes an at-home treatment is prescribed. These treatments include applying a topical retinoid, topical immune modifier, or other topical antiviral medication.

During treatment, some growths may appear as others are fading. This is normal.

An option, especially with young children, is not to treat molluscum and wait for the growths to disappear. This avoids exposure to possible side effects from treatment; however, if rapid growth of new lesions is noted, a dermatologist should be consulted. It is always possible for a person's skin to get infected with the virus again. The condition may be easier to control if treatment is started early — when there are only a few growths.