



MOLLUSCUM CONTAGIOSUM

What are the aims of this leaflet?

This leaflet has been written to explain more about molluscum contagiosum: what it is, what causes it, what can be done about it, and where to find out more about it.

What is molluscum contagiosum?

Molluscum contagiosum is a common and generally harmless condition that causes spots on the skin. It is most common in children and young adults.

What causes molluscum contagiosum?

Molluscum contagiosum is caused by a virus. It is infectious and can spread to other people if the spots are in direct contact with someone, or by sharing the same items such as towels, flannels, bedding, etc. The spots usually appear a few weeks later. They are more common and extensive in people who have eczema. Sometimes people who have a suppressed immune system, for any reason, such as by HIV infection or through taking immunosuppressive treatments, may develop larger numbers of molluscum spots, but most people affected by molluscum contagiosum are generally in good health.

Is molluscum contagiosum hereditary?

No, although it can affect several members of a family at the same time as it is contagious.

What are the symptoms?

Sometimes the spots can be itchy but most of the time they are asymptomatic. If they are scratched or squeezed, they could become infected and feel sore. They can bleed slightly if scratched.

What does molluscum contagiosum look like?

The molluscum contagiosum spots have the following characteristics:

- They are usually small (from 2 to 6 mm across); however, they can grow larger than this, up to 10 to 20 mm.
- They are raised bumps on the skin (like a tiny dome), with a shiny surface.
- Usually they are skin coloured, although they can be red or pink.
- Their most striking feature is a central dimple.
- Sometimes areas of dry redness, like eczema, appear around the spots.

There may be only one or two spots, and usually fewer than 20. However, they can be clustered together. The most common areas where these spots appear are on the face, chest, armpit, upper legs, and genital area.

How will molluscum contagiosum be diagnosed?

Usually, no tests are needed as the spots can easily be recognised by a doctor. If a molluscum contagiosum spot becomes inflamed, it can look like a boil. If there is uncertainty about the diagnosis, then a skin biopsy can be carried out.

Can molluscum contagiosum be cured?

Yes. This condition usually clears by itself within 6 to 18 months. However, during this time there may be development of new ones whilst the old spots are clearing. Sometimes it may take a few years for the body to clear all the spots.

How can molluscum contagiosum be treated?

Usually, no treatment is needed and the molluscum contagiosum spots clear on their own. After the spots have healed and cleared, the skin may initially look white, pink, or purplish, but this usually goes back to a normal skin-tone over time.

There are a few treatments which may help to speed up the process of clearing the spots. However, this is dependent on the age of the person affected. Many treatments are painful, and this must be taken into consideration as molluscum contagiosum is a harmless and self-resolving condition. Furthermore, it is thought that some treatments can increase the risk of scarring. There is no research evidence that any one treatment is better than others at clearing molluscum contagiosum.

If active treatment is needed, there are several possibilities:

- There are a range of topical therapies used which include salicylic acid and potassium hydroxide. These work by irritating the spots and causing them to become inflamed. The immune system then detects the virus and clears the spots. The medication needs to be applied carefully to prevent unnecessary skin irritation. Sometimes a small scar or paler area of skin is left.
- The spots can be frozen with liquid nitrogen (cryotherapy) at intervals until they are clear.
- The spots can be scraped off with a sharp instrument (curettage) after local anaesthetic injection by the doctor or dermatologist.
- A hospital eye specialist can treat spots on the eyelids.
- A cream containing a chemical that affects the immune system (Imiquimod) has been used for molluscum contagiosum, but it is not licensed for the condition and some research studies have shown that it is not effective.
- Squeezing the spots is no longer recommended as it can result in scarring and risk spreading the spots to others part of the body.
- It is not advisable to cut the top layer of these spots as this may spread the virus or leave slight scars, especially if they get infected afterwards.

Selfcare (What can I do?)

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

Where can I get more information?

Links to other Internet sites:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/molluscum-contagiosum/>

<http://www.pcids.org.uk/clinical-guidance/molluscum-contagiosum>

<http://www.dermnetnz.org/viral/molluscum-contagiosum.html>

Please note: The BAD provides links to help people access a range of information about their skin disease. The views expressed in these links may not be those of the BAD or its members.

For details of source materials used please contact the Clinical Standards Unit (clinicalstandards@bad.org.uk).

This leaflet aims to provide accurate information about the subject and is a consensus of the views held by representatives of the British Association of Dermatologists: individual patient circumstances may differ, which might alter both the advice and course of therapy given to you by your doctor.

This leaflet has been assessed for readability by the British Association of Dermatologists' Patient Information Lay Review Panel

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