

Molluscum contagiosum

Molluscum contagiosum is a viral skin infection caused by the molluscum contagiosum virus (MCV). It is a sexually transmissible infection (STI) in adults as it can be spread by skin-to-skin contact, during sexual contact. A person can also spread them around their body by scratching especially in areas where the skin is broken. Occasionally bathing, towels and other objects can spread MCV.

MCV in children is common and results from close contact with other children who have the infection.

Signs and symptoms of molluscum contagiosum

MCV may cause small lumps or lesions (around 1–5mm in diameter) to appear on the skin of the thighs, genitals and abdominal area. It usually does not affect other parts of your body.

MCV lesions:

- Are painless, but may be slightly itchy
- Often have a tiny central indentation
- Can be numerous and cover thighs, genital and abdominal area
- Will eventually resolve without treatment (are 'self-limiting') within a few months.

Diagnosis of molluscum contagiosum

MCV can be mistaken for genital warts or pimples. If you notice any unusual skin lesions, it is recommended that you see your doctor or other experienced health professional for an accurate diagnosis. There is no test for MCV – it is diagnosed by the lesions' appearance only. Your health professional may recommend tests for STIs at the same time if you have MCV.

Treatment of molluscum contagiosum

Treatment is available, although MCV will eventually clear up by itself if left untreated. MCV lesions are usually treated with liquid nitrogen which freezes the lesion. This helps reduce the length of time that symptoms are present. Liquid nitrogen treatment:

- Is commonly available from your local doctor or sexual health centre
- Is cosmetic and it is not a cure as the virus remains on the skin until your immune system has got rid of it
- Usually only a single treatment is needed. However, it may take a couple of weeks for the lumps to disappear after freezing with liquid nitrogen.

People with suppressed immune systems may take longer for MCV to clear. Sexual partners of a person with MCV do not need treatment if they have no lesions on their body.

Possible complications of molluscum contagiosum

Bacterial infections can complicate MCV, however, this is rare. To lessen the risk of bacterial infection or the spread of MCV, do not pick, squeeze or irritate the MCV lesions. There is no need to apply creams or lotions, just keep up your usual hygiene practices.

If molluscum contagiosum is not treated

MCV is a mild, 'self-limiting' skin infection. Without treatment, it can persist for several months but will eventually resolve. The duration, severity and length of treatment of MCV varies from person to person.

Things to remember

- MCV is a mild, harmless viral skin infection.
- It is characterised by small, smooth, round, pearly lumps with a central core.
- The infection usually resolves itself, but treatment can shorten the length of symptoms.
- Your sexual partners do not need treatment if they have no symptoms.
- Testing for other STIs is recommended.

Where to get help

- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre Tel. (03) 9341 6200 or 1800 032 017 or TTY (for the hearing impaired) (03) 9347 8619
- Your local doctor or nurse

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Melbourne Sexual Health Centre

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