Molluscum contagiosum

Summary

- Molluscum contagiosum is a mild, harmless viral skin infection.
- It is common in children and results from close contact with other children who have the infection.
- Molluscum contagiosum is a sexually transmissible infection (STI) in adults as it can be spread by skin-to-skin contact during sex.
- 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 if you have molluscum contagiosum.

Molluscum contagiosum is a viral skin infection caused by the molluscum contagiosum virus. It is a sexually transmissible infection (STI) in adults as it can be spread by skin-to-skin contact during sex.

You can also spread the infection around your body by scratching, especially in areas where the skin is broken. Occasionally, molluscum contagiosum can be spread by bathing (bath or pool water), or by touching objects that have the virus on them, such as bath toys, towels, clothing or bedding.

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

Symptoms of molluscum contagiosum

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

The lesions:
- are painless, but may be slightly itchy
- often have a tiny central indentation
- can be numerous and cover the thighs, genital and abdominal areas
- will eventually resolve without treatment within a few months (are ‘self-limiting’).

Diagnosis of molluscum contagiosum

Molluscum contagiosum 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 molluscum contagiosum – it is diagnosed only by the appearance of the lesions. If you have molluscum contagiosum, your health professional may recommend tests for other STIs.

Treatment of molluscum contagiosum

Treatment is available, although molluscum contagiosum will eventually clear up by itself if left untreated. The lesions are usually treated with liquid nitrogen, which freezes them. 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 requires a single treatment. 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 molluscum contagiosum to clear. Sexual partners of a person with molluscum contagiosum do not need treatment if they have no lesions on their body.

Complications of molluscum contagiosum

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

If molluscum contagiosum is not treated

Molluscum contagiosum 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 molluscum contagiosum vary from person to person.

Where to get help

• Your GP
• Your school nurse or school welfare coordinator
• Youth worker, welfare worker or social worker
• Your local community health centre
• Family Planning Victoria Action Centre Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9660 4700
• Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100
• Melbourne Sexual Health Centre Tel. (03) 9341 6200 or 1800 032 017 or TTY (for the hearing impaired) (03) 9347 8619
• Victoria AIDS Council/Gay Men’s Health Centre Tel. (03) 9865 6700 or 1800 134 840
• The Education and Resource Centre at The Alfred Tel. (03) 9076 6993.
• The Centre Clinic, St Kilda Tel. (03) 9525 5866

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

Melbourne Sexual Health Centre

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