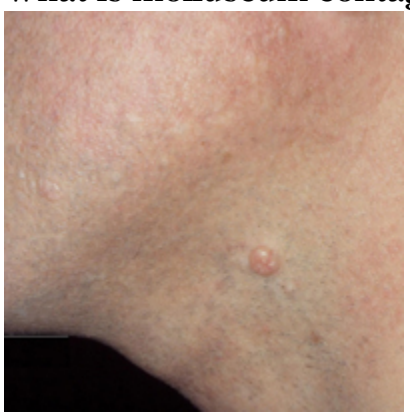
What is molluscum contagiosum?



A single molluscum bump on the neck of an adult man. Typical bumps are approximately 3-5 mm in diameter. Image courtesy Scott Norton, MD, MPH, Dept. of Dermatology, Walter Reed Army Medical Center

Molluscum contagiosum is caused by a virus and usually causes a mild skin disease. The virus affects only the outer (epithelial) layer of skin and does not circulate throughout the body in healthy people.
The virus causes small white, pink, or flesh-colored raised bumps or growths with a dimple or pit in the center. The bumps are usually smooth and firm. In most people, the growths range from about the size of a pinhead to as large as a pencil eraser (2 to 5 millimeters in diameter).

The bumps may appear anywhere on the body, alone or in groups. They are usually painless, although they may be itchy, red, swollen and/or sore.

Molluscum usually disappears within 6 to 12 months without treatment and without leaving scars. Some growths may remain for up to 4 years.

Who gets molluscum contagiosum?

Molluscum infections occur worldwide but are more common in warm, humid climates and where living conditions are crowded. There is evidence that molluscum infections have been on the rise in the United States since 1966, but these infections are not routinely monitored because they are seldom serious and routinely disappear without treatment.

Molluscum is common enough that you should not be surprised if you see someone with it or if someone in your family becomes infected. Although not limited to children, it is most common in children 1 to 10 years of age. People with weakened immune systems (i.e., HIV-infected persons or persons being treated for cancer) are at higher risk for getting molluscum, and their growths may look different, be larger, and be more difficult to treat.

How do people become infected with the molluscum virus?

The virus that causes molluscum is spread from person to person by touching the affected skin. The virus may also be spread by touching a surface with the virus on it, such as a towel, clothing, or toys. Once someone has the virus, the bumps can spread to other parts of their body by touching or scratching a bump and then touching another part of the body. Molluscum can be spread from one person to another by sexual contact.

Although the virus might be spread by sharing swimming pools, baths, saunas, or other wet and warm environments, this has not been proven. Researchers who have investigated this idea think it is more likely the virus is spread by sharing towels and other items around a pool or sauna than through water.

How would I know if I had molluscum contagiosum?

Close-up view of typical molluscum bumps. Typical bumps are approximately 3-5 mm in diameter.
Image courtesy Dave Bray, MD, WRAMC

Only a health care provider can diagnose molluscum infection. If you have any unusual skin irritation, rash, bump(s), or blister(s) that do not disappear in a few days, you should see a health care provider.

If you have molluscum, you will see small white, pink, or flesh-colored raised bumps or growths with a pit or dimple in the center. The bumps are usually smooth and firm. They can be as small as the head of a pin and as large as a pencil eraser (2 to 5 millimeters in diameter). The growths are usually painless but may become itchy, sore and red and/or swollen. They may occur anywhere on the body including the face, neck, arms, legs, abdomen, and genital area, alone or in groups. The bumps are rarely found on the palms of the hands or the soles of the feet.

What should I do if I think I have molluscum contagiosum?

If you have any unusual skin irritation, rash, bumps, or blisters that do not disappear in a few days, contact a health care provider. Only a health care professional can diagnose molluscum. He or she will discuss treatment options and how to care for the affected skin.

How can I avoid becoming infected with molluscum?

The best way to avoid getting molluscum is by following good hygiene habits.

- Do not touch, pick, or scratch any skin with bumps or blisters (yours or someone else's).
- Good hand hygiene is the best way to avoid getting many infections including molluscum. By washing your hands frequently you wash away germs picked up from other people or from contaminated surfaces.

I have molluscum. How can I avoid spreading it to others?

Here's an example of two types of watertight bandages you can find in your local drugstore.
Image courtesy Edie Lederman, MD, CDC

It is important to keep the area with growths clean and covered with clothing or a bandage so that others do not touch the bumps and become infected with molluscum.
However, when there is no risk of others coming into contact with your skin, such as at night when you sleep, uncover the bumps to help keep your skin healthy.

Before participating in sports in which your body will come into contact with another person's body (i.e., wrestling) or shared equipment (swimming pools) cover all growths with clothing or a watertight bandage.

Do not share towels, clothing, or other personal items.

Do not shave or have electrolysis on areas with bumps.

If you have bumps in the genital area, avoid sexual activities until you see a health care provider.

How long does the molluscum contagiosum virus stay in my body?

The virus lives only in the skin and once the growths are gone, the virus is gone and you cannot spread the virus to others.

Molluscum contagiosum is not like herpes viruses, which can remain dormant ("sleeping") in your body for long periods and then reappear. So, assuming you do not come in contact with another infected person, once all the molluscum contagiosum bumps go away, you will not develop any new bumps.

How is molluscum treated?

You should discuss all treatment options with a health care provider. Usually no treatment is needed because the bumps disappear by themselves within 6-12 months, although this may take up to 4 years.

To prevent the spread of molluscum to other areas of your body or to other people, it is important to keep every blister or bump covered either with clothing or with a watertight bandage. However, to promote healthy skin, do remove the bandage at night and when there is no risk of others coming into contact with your skin.

A number of treatment options are available, but some (available from internet services) are not effective and may even be harmful. Therefore, always discuss any possible therapy with your health care provider. Treating the molluscum growths may prevent spread to other parts of the body and to other people. Not everyone agrees on how well treatments work.

Treatment is more difficult for persons with weakened immune systems (for example, people who are HIV positive or receiving cancer drugs). For people with weakened immune systems, the best treatment seems to be medications that help strengthen the immune system.

Treatment Options in the Health Care Setting

Cryotherapy (freezing the molluscum growth) is one treatment option. This is the same way that warts are removed from the skin. Another option is to remove the fluid inside the bumps (termed **curettage**). **Lasers** also can remove molluscum bumps.

All three options may be a little painful and should only be done by a health care professional. Both curettage and cryotherapy methods may leave scars. In a small percentage of cases, natural healing of molluscum contagiosum bumps lead to scars regardless of type of therapy.

Treatment Options in the Home Setting

Check with a health care provider before using any of these treatments. Most of these creams and oral medicines are available by prescription.

Creams that include certain chemicals (i.e., salicylic acid, podophyllin, tretinoin, and cantharidin) may be used to remove the bumps. There is also a newer cream (imiquimod) that helps strengthen the skin's immune system. The creams are applied directly to each growth. Unfortunately these creams do not always remove the bumps and they may be harmful.

The oral medicine **cimetidine** has been used for treatment of molluscum in small children. This medicine is available only by prescription. As with all medications, cimetidine may cause unwanted side effects.

In general, medications should not be used by pregnant women, women who are breast feeding, or women who may become pregnant—without first asking a health care provider.

Once I am cured can I be reinfected with molluscum contagiosum?

Yes. Recovery from one infection with molluscum does not prevent future infections with molluscum so it is important not to pick at or scratch other people's skin.

However, molluscum contagiosum is not like herpes viruses, which can remain dormant ("sleeping") in your body for long periods of time and then reappear. If you get new molluscum contagiosum bumps after you are cured, it means you have come in contact with an infected person or object.

Should I try to remove the bumps caused by molluscum?

It is not a good idea to try to remove the molluscum growths or to get rid of the fluid inside them yourself.

Be aware that some treatments available through the internet are not effective and may even be harmful!

There are three important reasons not to treat the bumps without seeing a doctor first.

1. The treatment may be painful.
2. You might spread the bumps to another part of your body or to another person.
3. By scratching and scraping the skin you might cause a more serious bacterial infection. If you want to have the growths removed or treated, talk to a health care provider. Molluscum bumps usually will disappear without treatment in 6 to 12 months and not leave scars, but it may not go away completely for up to 4 years.

Are there any complications of molluscum contagiosum infection?

The most common complication is a secondary infection caused by bacteria. Additionally, the removal of bumps by scratching, freezing (cryotherapy), or fluid removal (curettage) can leave scars on the skin.

Can my child go to day care or school if he or she has molluscum?

There should be no reason to keep a child with molluscum infection home from day care or school.

Growths not covered by clothing should be covered with a watertight bandage. Change the bandage daily or when obviously soiled.

If a child with bumps in the underwear/diaper area needs assistance going to the bathroom or needs diaper changes, then growths in this area should be bandaged too if possible.

Covering the bumps will protect other children and adults from getting molluscum and will also keep the child from touching and scratching the bumps, which could spread the bumps to other parts of his/her body or cause secondary (bacterial) infections.

Remind children to wash their hands frequently.

What do I need to know about swimming pools and molluscum?

Some investigations report that spread of molluscum contagiosum *is* increased in swimming pools. However, it has not been proved how or under what circumstances swimming pools might increase spread of the virus. Activities related to swimming might be the cause. For example, the virus might spread from one person to another if they share a towel or toys. More research is needed to understand if and for how long the molluscum virus can live in swimming pool water and if such water can infect swimmers.

Open sores and breaks in the skin can become infected by many different germs. Therefore, people with open sores or breaks from any cause should not go into swimming pools.

If a person has molluscum bumps, the following recommendations should be followed when swimming:

- Cover all visible bumps with watertight bandages
- Dispose of all used bandages at home
- Do not share towels, kick boards or other equipment, or toys

Is molluscum contagiosum a sexually transmitted disease?

Molluscum contagiosum can be spread by any contact between two people—this includes sexual contact. Many, but not all, cases of molluscum in adults are caused by sexual contact.

Treatment for molluscum is usually recommended if the growths are in the genital area (on or near the penis, vulva, vagina, or anus). If bumps are found in the genital area, it is a good idea to discuss with a health care provider the possibility that you might have another disease that is spread by sexual contact.

Severe case of molluscum on an immunocompromised patient's back. Image courtesy Inger Damon, MD, CDC

Where can I find more information?

The resources listed below will help you find more information about molluscum.

American Academy of Dermatology
The American Academy of Dermatology provides information about the care of skin, hair, and nails.
Web Address: http://www.aad.org
Phone: (847) 330-0230
1-888-462-DERM (1-888-462-3376) for information on finding a dermatologist
Fax: (847) 330-0050

American Social Health Association
The American Social Health Association's mission is to stop sexually transmitted diseases, including molluscum contagiosum, and their harmful effects.
Web Address: http://www.ashastd.org
Phone: (919) 361-8400
Fax: (919) 361-8425

National Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases Information Clearinghouse, National Institutes of Health
The clearinghouse provides educational materials about arthritis and musculoskeletal and skin diseases to the public and health professionals.
Web Address: http://www.nih.gov/niams
Phone: (301) 495-4484
Fax: (301) 718-6366
TDD: (301) 565-2966

Hotlines

Hotlines are places you can call to ask questions, get printed information, and often get referrals for treatment.

National STD and AIDS Hotlines
1-800-342-2437 or 1-800-227-8922, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
En Espanol: 1-800-344-7432, 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. Eastern Time, seven days a week.
For the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing: 1-800-243-7889, 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday.

Contact CDC

Mail:
Centers for Disease
Control and Prevention
National Center for Infectious Diseases
Division of Viral and Rickettsial Diseases
1600 Clifton Rd. NE MS G-43 Atlanta, GA 30333
Call:
Public Inquiries:
(404) 639-4129
E-mail:
ncid@cdc.gov