

## What is molluscum contagiosum (MC)?

Molluscum contagiosum is a viral disease of the skin that causes small pink or skin-colored bumps on the skin. It is not harmful and usually does not have any other symptoms. The virus is inside the bumps and is mildly contagious over an extended period of time. These bumps usually clear on their own in six to nine months. It is common worldwide and accounts for about one percent of all skin disorders in the United States. It is most common in children and adolescents, although it can affect adults.

## What causes molluscum contagiosum and how is it spread?

Molluscum contagiosum is caused by a virus called the poxvirus. A person can contract MC primarily by direct contact with a person who has the infection, or by indirect contact with shared items, such as clothing, towels, and washcloths. MC can be spread by touching the rash and then another part of the body. Although the likelihood of infection is generally low, it is unknown how long a person is contagious.

Outbreaks have occurred in the following settings:

- Swimming pools (in children)
- Wrestling matches
- During surgery, by a surgeon with a hand lesion
- Via tattoos (although rarely)
- Sexually: MC can be sexually transmitted but not all genital lesions are sexually transmitted.

## What is the incubation period of molluscum contagiosum?

The period between exposure and development of symptoms can range from one week to six months.

## What are the symptoms of molluscum contagiosum?

Molluscum contagiosum rash begins as tiny papules (small raised bumps), each measuring three to six millimeters (about one-eighth to one-quarter inch). Some lesions may be as large as three centimeters (1.2 inches) across.

- The MC rash appears as smooth, flesh-colored, dome-shaped papules. With time, the center becomes soft and indented (umbilicated) with a white core. This core may be squeezed out easily. Some redness and scaling are possible at the edges of a lesion. This may be the result of inflammation or from scratching.
- Lesions may be located on any area of the skin and on mucous membranes. They are usually grouped in one or two areas, but may be widely spread. Most commonly, they are located on the face, eyelids, neck, underarms, thighs or genital area. Usually, fewer than 20 lesions appear, but several hundred are possible.
- The rash rarely involves the mouth, palms, or soles.
- The rash usually causes no itching or tenderness. There are no generalized symptoms such as fever, nausea, or weakness.
- People with impaired immune systems can develop multiple widespread, persistent, and disfiguring lesions, especially on the face and possibly involving the neck and trunk. These lesions can come together to form giant lesions. Examples of people with weakened immune systems include those with cancer or AIDS or people taking medications such as steroids that affect the body's defense mechanisms.
- In some cases, development of severe MC may be an indication of infection with HIV. Most people with MC, however, have no such serious underlying medical problem.

**How is molluscum contagiosum diagnosed?**

Molluscum contagiosum is usually diagnosed based on a medical history and physical examination. Additional tests are not routinely ordered.

**What is the treatment for molluscum contagiosum?**

In most cases, the lesions will heal without treatment over a period of six to nine months. Removal of lesions reduces the rate of spread to other people as well as from one part of the body to another, which happens by touching the lesions (called autoinoculation). Genital lesions in adults should be treated in order to prevent spread through sexual contact. The most popular treatments are scraping of the lesions (called curettage), or removal using heat (called cautery) or cold (called cryotherapy, and performed with liquid nitrogen).

**What can be done to prevent molluscum contagiosum?**

Good personal hygiene is a key factor in avoiding transmission of this disease.

- MC is spread by close personal contact with infected people. Avoid skin-to-skin contact with others in order to prevent transmission.
- Transmission has been shown to occur in children from swimming pools and in the sharing of baths, towels, gym equipment, and benches.
- Because the rash can spread by autoinoculation (spread from one part of the body to another by touching the lesions), avoid scratching the lesions.
- Because sexual transmission is common in adults, avoid sexual contact with infected people. It is unclear whether condoms are effective in preventing spread of MC.

