

< p class="nojs"> < strong>Warning: The NCBI web site requires JavaScript to function. < a href="http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/corehtml/query/static/unsupported-browser.html#enablejs" title="Learn how to enable JavaScript" target="_blank">more...
< /p>

Molluscum contagiosum

Last reviewed: May 13, 2011.

Molluscum contagiosum is a viral skin infection that causes raised, pearl-like **papules** or **nodules** on the skin.

Causes, incidence, and risk factors

Molluscum contagiosum is caused by a virus that is a member of the poxvirus family. You can get the infection in a number of different ways.

This is a common infection in children and occurs when a child comes into direct contact with a lesion. It is frequently seen on the face, neck, armpit, arms, and hands but may occur anywhere on the body except the palms and soles.

The virus can spread through contact with contaminated objects, such as towels, clothing, or toys.

The virus also spreads by sexual contact. Early lesions on the genitalia may be mistaken for herpes or warts but, unlike herpes, these lesions are painless.

Persons with a weakened immune system (due to conditions such as **AIDS**) may have a rapidly worse case of molluscum contagiosum.

Symptoms

Typically, the lesion of molluscum begins as a small, painless papule that may become raised up to a pearly, flesh-colored nodule. The papule often has a dimple in the center. These papules may occur in lines, where the person has scratched. Scratching or other irritation causes the virus to spread in a line or in groups, called crops.

The papules are about 2 - 5 millimeters wide. There is usually no inflammation and subsequently no redness unless you have been digging or scratching at the lesions.

The skin lesion commonly has a central core or plug of white, cheesy or waxy material.

In adults, the lesions are commonly seen on the genitals, abdomen, and inner thigh.

Signs and tests

Diagnosis is based on the appearance of the lesion and can be confirmed by a [skin biopsy](#). The health care provider should examine the lesion to rule out other disorders and to determine other underlying disorders.

Treatment

In people with normal immune systems, the disorder usually goes away on its own over a period of months to years.

Persons with a compromised immune system (such as AIDS) may have a rapidly worse case of molluscum contagiosum.

Individual lesions may be removed surgically, by scraping, de-coring, freezing, or through needle electrosurgery. Surgical removal of

individual lesions may result in scarring.

Medications, such as those used to remove [warts](#), may be helpful in removal of lesions, but can cause blistering that leads to temporary skin discoloration. Cantharidin, commonly called "beetle juice," is the most common solution used to treat the lesions. [Tretinoin](#) cream or imiquimod cream may also be prescribed.

Expectations (prognosis)

Molluscum contagiosum lesions may persist from a few months to a few years. These lesions ultimately disappear without scarring, unless there is excessive scratching, which may leave marks.

Individual lesions usually disappear within about 2 - 3 months.

Complete disappearance of all lesions generally occurs within about 6 - 18 months. The disorder may persist in [immunosuppressed](#) people.

Complications

- Persistence, spread, or recurrence of lesions
- Secondary bacterial skin infections

Calling your health care provider

Call for an appointment with your health care provider if you have symptoms suggestive of molluscum contagiosum. Also call for an appointment with your health care provider if lesions persist or spread, or if new symptoms appear.

Prevention

Avoid direct contact with the skin lesions. Do not share towels with

other people.

Avoiding sex can also prevent molluscum virus and other STDs. You can also avoid STDs by having a monogamous sexual relationship with a partner known to be disease-free.

Male and female condoms cannot fully protect you, as the virus can be on areas not covered by the condom. Nonetheless, condoms should still be used every time the disease status of a sexual partner is unknown. They reduce your chances of getting or spreading STDs. Use them with spermicide with nonoxynol 9.

See: [Safer sex practices](#).

References

1. Cohen J, Powderly WG. *Infectious Diseases*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Elsevier; 2004:2053-2056.

Review Date: 5/13/2011.

Reviewed by: Kevin Berman, MD, PhD, Atlanta Center for Dermatologic Disease, Atlanta, GA. Review provided by VeriMed Healthcare Network. Also reviewed by David Zieve, MD, MHA, Medical Director, A.D.A.M., Inc.

Figures



Molluscum contagiosum - close-up

Molluscum is a viral infection which generally goes away by itself (is self-limited). The lesions are typically raised, firm, flesh-colored bumps (papules) with a pearly or smooth shiny appearance.

Review Date: 11/14/2010.

Reviewed by: David C. Dugdale, III, MD, Professor of Medicine, Division of General Medicine, Department of Medicine, University of Washington School of Medicine. Also reviewed by David Zieve, MD, MHA, Medical Director, A.D.A.M., Inc.



Molluscum contagiosum - close-up of the chest

Molluscum is a benign infection which is generally self-limited. The lesions are typically raised, firm, flesh-colored bumps (papules) with a pearly or smooth shiny appearance. These are classical appearing Molluscum. The large lesion in the center is one that has been picked and scratched and shows evidence of low-grade inflammation.

Review Date: 11/14/2010.

Reviewed by: David C. Dugdale, III, MD, Professor of Medicine, Division of General Medicine, Department of Medicine, University of Washington School of Medicine. Also reviewed by David Zieve, MD, MHA, Medical Director, A.D.A.M., Inc.

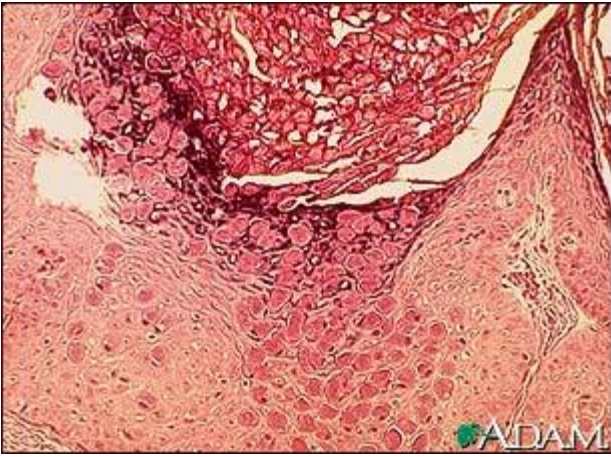


Molluscum on the chest

These lesions are associated with the molluscum virus and are present on a person who has a weakened immune system (immunocompromised). Molluscum contagiosum are small, raised, pearly skin lesions caused by the molluscum virus, a member of the poxvirus family. They are seen frequently in children and less often in adults. In adults, they may be considered a sexually transmitted disease. Immunocompromised individuals may experience heavy outbreaks of these lesions, as seen in this photograph.

Review Date: 6/9/2011.

Reviewed by: David C. Dugdale, III, MD, Professor of Medicine, Division of General Medicine, Department of Medicine, University of Washington School of Medicine; and Jatin M. Vyas, MD, PhD, Assistant Professor in Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Assistant in Medicine, Division of Infectious Disease, Department of Medicine, Massachusetts General Hospital. Also reviewed by David Zieve, MD, MHA, Medical Director, A.D.A.M., Inc.



Molluscum, microscopic appearance

This is how a molluscum lesion appears under microscopic examination. Molluscum are small, raised, pearly skin lesions caused by the molluscum virus, a member of the poxvirus family.

Review Date: 5/13/2011.

Reviewed by: Kevin Berman, MD, PhD, Atlanta Center for Dermatologic Disease, Atlanta, GA. Review provided by VeriMed Healthcare Network. Also reviewed by David Zieve, MD, MHA, Medical Director, A.D.A.M., Inc.



Molluscum contagiosum on the face

Molluscum contagiosum is most commonly seen in children, however it does occur in adults and may cause extensive infection in people with weakened immune systems. In this photograph, multiple small molluscum are seen covering the cheek, upper neck, and in the sideburn.

Review Date: 6/9/2011.

Reviewed by: David C. Dugdale, III, MD, Professor of Medicine, Division of General Medicine, Department of Medicine, University of Washington School of Medicine; and Jatin M. Vyas, MD, PhD, Assistant Professor in Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Assistant in Medicine, Division of Infectious Disease, Department of Medicine, Massachusetts General Hospital. Also reviewed by David Zieve, MD, MHA, Medical Director, A.D.A.M., Inc.



[A.D.A.M., Disclaimer](#)

A.D.A.M., Inc. is accredited by URAC, also known as the American Accreditation HealthCare Commission (<http://www.urac.org/>). URAC's accreditation program is an independent audit to verify that A.D.A.M. follows rigorous standards of quality and accountability. A.D.A.M. is among the first to achieve this important distinction for online health information and services. Learn more about A.D.A.M.'s editorial policy, editorial process and privacy policy. A.D.A.M. is also a founding member of Hi-Ethics and subscribes to the principles of the Health on the Net Foundation (<http://www.hon.ch/>).

The information provided herein should not be used during any medical emergency or for the diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. A licensed medical professional should be consulted for diagnosis and treatment of any and all medical conditions. Call 911 for all medical emergencies. Links to other sites are provided for information only – they do not constitute endorsements of those other sites. © 1997-2011 A.D.A.M., Inc. Any duplication or distribution of the information contained herein is strictly prohibited.

Copyright © 2012, A.D.A.M., Inc.