

## UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

**MOLLUSCUM CONTAGIOSUM****WHAT IS IT?**

Molluscum is a common skin infection caused by the *molluscum contagiosum* virus. The virus only infects the top layers of the skin, causing characteristic small bumps to appear. Any part of the body can be affected except for the palms and soles. Left untreated, the bumps will typically resolve on their own within a few months without scarring.

Molluscum occurs most commonly in children and is traditionally viewed as a pediatric disease. However, when molluscum is found in the genital area of sexually active individuals, it is considered to be a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

**HOW IS IT TRANSMITTED?**

Humans are the only known host for molluscum. The virus is spread by direct skin-to-skin contact and through contaminated objects. The affected person is contagious until all the bumps have resolved.

**❖ Skin-To-Skin Contact**

- Molluscum is often spread by direct contact with infected skin. However, it is not clear whether contact with intact lesions causes infections or if exposure to the firm, cheesy core inside the bump is required.
- Most cases of molluscum in adults are spread through sexual contact.
- Participants in contact sports, such as wrestling, are also at higher risk for developing molluscum because of frequent skin-to-skin contact.
- The virus can be spread from one part of an infected person's body to another part of their body by scratching or touching the bumps. This is called autoinoculation. Shaving can also spread molluscum.

**❖ Contaminated Objects**

- Molluscum can be transmitted through contaminated items, such as clothing, towels, bath sponges, razors, toys, pool equipment, etc.
- The virus might be spread by sharing swimming pools, baths, and other warm & wet environments. However, this is unproven, and it is more likely that the virus is spread by sharing items used in these environments.

**WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?**

Molluscum appears as a firm pearly or flesh-colored bump with a central indentation that resembles a belly button.

- It usually takes 2-6 weeks for bumps to develop following exposure to the virus.
- The bumps begin as small, pinpoint elevations that can grow to 2-5 millimeters in diameter.
- Lesions can be found anywhere on the body except the palms and soles. Sexually transmitted molluscum can involve the genitals, lower abdomen, groin, upper thighs, and buttocks.
- The lesions are usually painless but can be itchy. Sometimes, the skin around the bumps will become red and irritated as the immune system fights the infection.
- Molluscum lesions usually disappear on their own within 2 months in healthy individuals, though it may take 6-12 months in some cases. Rarely, molluscum may persist for 3-5 years without treatment.

Symptoms tend to be more severe and widespread in individuals with immunodeficiencies (such as HIV or those taking immunosuppressive medications).

## **HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?**

No special testing is required. Molluscum is diagnosed based on the characteristic appearance of its dome-shaped, umbilicated bumps.

- Sometimes, molluscum is mistaken for an irritated hair follicle; however, no hair shaft should protrude from the center of a molluscum lesion.
- If molluscum is found in the genital area of sexually active individuals, screening for other STIs is strongly recommended.

## **HOW IS IT TREATED?**

Though molluscum does not cause serious problems, it is usually treated to prevent further spread of the infection. Treatment is recommended in all sexually active individuals who have bumps on or near their penis, vaginal area, or buttocks. If you have lesions in these areas, avoid sexual contact until you are evaluated and treated by a medical provider.

### **Treatment Options**

- ❖ Cryotherapy is the most commonly used treatment. Your medical provider will use liquid nitrogen to freeze the lesions, which kills the virus in the core.
  - Multiple treatments are usually necessary. Because the virus is easily spread by skin-to-skin contact, additional bumps may develop while others are resolving.
  - Most lesions heal quickly. Mild scarring or changes in skin color may occur after cryotherapy.
  - Bacterial infection following treatment is rare. If you notice redness, tenderness, or drainage in the area treated, return to the clinic to rule out an infection.
- ❖ Other first-line treatment options include the following:
  - Cantharidin is a blistering solution that is applied to molluscum lesions by a medical provider. A few hours after application, small painful blisters will develop at the treatment sites, followed by disappearance of the bumps without scarring. This treatment may be repeated every 2-4 weeks but is usually avoided in the genital area.
  - Curettage involves physically removing the bumps with a surgical tool called a curette.
  - Podofilox (Condylox) gel or solution can be applied twice daily for 3 consecutive days, then withheld for 4 days. This cycle may be repeated up to 4 consecutive weeks. Local redness, burning, and irritation may occur. It is not approved for use in children.
- ❖ Referral to a dermatologist may be recommended if a large number of lesions are present.

## **HOW DO I KEEP IT FROM SPREADING?**

The best way to avoid getting molluscum and to prevent it from spreading is to wash your hands well! Other preventive measures include the following:

- ❖ **Skin Care**
  - Avoid touching the bumps. Do not pick at or try to scrape off the bumps yourself. You are likely to spread the lesions or cause a bacterial infection of the skin.
  - Avoid shaving in the area where the bumps are located.
  - Cover the bumps with clothing or a bandage to prevent transmission to others. Keep the skin clean and dry (avoid wet bandages). You may uncover the bumps at night when you sleep (if you sleep alone) to help keep your skin healthy.
- ❖ **Activities to Avoid**
  - Avoid sexual contact if you have lesions in or near the genital area. Once lesions are resolved, limit the number of sexual partners and use protection consistently.
  - Do not share personal-care items (like towels, razors, bar soap, hair brushes, etc.) or sports equipment (like helmets, baseball gloves, swimming goggles, etc.).
  - Avoid contact sports (like wrestling, football, and basketball) unless all lesions are covered.

**RECOMMENDED WEBSITES:** [www.aad.org](http://www.aad.org), [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov), [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)