
Molluscum contagiosum – information for carers

What is Molluscum contagiosum?

Molluscum contagiosum is a viral skin infection. Mollusca are small skin coloured or pink shiny bumps on the skin that often form in little clusters. Mollusca are a common and harmless infection affecting the top layers of the skin. The mollusca are similar to warts but do not usually last as long. Typically, a single molluscum lasts anything from 6-18 months although new ones can continue to appear for a year or so. They usually affect children below 8 years.

Are they contagious?

Yes, but only in a mild sense. The virus is spread through direct skin-to-skin contact and usually only happens between young children of a susceptible age. Occasionally, adults get mollusca but this is usually because they are taking a medicine which suppresses their immune system. Children who get mollusca are perfectly healthy. Children with childhood eczema may be more prone to getting more persistent mollusca.

Is Molluscum contagiosum serious?

No. It is a harmless infection of the skin which sorts itself out and has nothing to do with cancer or any serious illness in children. Eventually, most people develop immunity to the molluscum virus. Children tend to get mollusca more than adults because they have not developed their own immunity to the virus.

How does it affect people?

Mollusca usually do not bother children at all. Sometimes, they can be itchy or they may bleed when the child gives them a good scratch. This is nothing to worry about and in fact, a good scratch may help the virus disappear more quickly from the skin. Rarely, they can get infected. Sometimes, a patch of eczema develops around the mollusca.

Will they go away?

Yes. Most mollusca disappear within 6-18 months although odd stubborn ones can last longer. Typically, a child will have a patch of mollusca on one area of the body. Some disappear as new ones appear, until eventually they all disappear as the child develops his/her own immunity against the molluscum virus. Sometimes, one or two of the mollusca may become large and red and look as if they are infected. Although mollusca can get infected, swelling and redness is usually a sign that the body's immune system is getting rid of them naturally.

Written by Professor Hywel Williams, Dr Jane Ravenscroft, Nurse Consultant Sandra Lawton, Dr Jothsana Srinivasan, Dr Ting Seng Tang and parents on behalf of the Nottingham Support Group for Carers of Children with Eczema

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Do they need to be treated?

No, because they go away on their own without leaving a scar. Destructive methods such as freezing them with liquid nitrogen or pricking them and squeezing out the contents can be used, but these methods can be painful for the child and sometimes cause scarring. Many creams or lotions have been tested for mollusca, but the studies are not very good and none have been shown to be convincingly effective. One cream called imiquimod that some doctors have used to treat mollusca does not work at all. Our view at this clinic is that mollusca should not be treated unless they are unusually large or persistent and your child is asking us for the treatment. The best treatment is to do nothing and let the body's immune system get rid of them naturally.

Further information

Interventions for cutaneous molluscum contagiosum

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD004767.pub4/full>

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