

# Molluscum contagiosum

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## Overview

**Molluscum contagiosum (MC) is a viral infection that affects the skin. It most commonly affects children, although it can occur at any age.**

MC is generally a harmless condition that normally gets better in a few months without any specific treatment.

However, it's common for the condition to spread around the body, so it can take up to 18 months or more for the condition to clear completely.

## Symptoms of molluscum contagiosum

Usually, the only symptom of MC is a number of small, firm, raised papules (spots) on the skin with a characteristic small dimple in the middle. The spots aren't painful, but can be itchy.

The spots may develop in small clusters and can be spread across different parts of the body. They're most often found in the armpit, behind the knees or on the groin.

MC can affect a person on more than one occasion, but this is uncommon.

Read about the [symptoms of MC](#).

## When to seek medical advice

See your GP if you notice the spots associated with MC. They're usually easy to recognise, so they should be able to diagnose the condition without the need for further tests.

If your GP thinks the infection may be caused by something other than MC, they may want to:

- take a skin sample ([biopsy](#)) from one of the spots to test it for the molluscum contagiosum virus (MCV)
- refer you to a genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinic to be tested for [sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#) – if you prefer, you can go to an [STI clinic](#) directly

They may refer you to a specialist in hospital if you have:

- spots on your eyelids, near your eye, or your eye is red or painful
- [HIV](#) and your symptoms are severe
- a weakened immune system for another reason – such as receiving [chemotherapy](#)

### **Causes of molluscum contagiosum**

MC is caused by a virus known as the molluscum contagiosum virus (MCV).

This virus can be spread through:

- close direct contact – such as touching the skin of an infected person
- touching contaminated objects – such as towels, flannels, toys and clothes
- sexual contact – this includes intimate physical contact as well as sexual intercourse

If you become infected by the virus and spots appear on your skin, the virus can also spread to other areas.

It's not known exactly how long someone with MC is contagious for, but it's thought the contagious period may last up until the last spot has disappeared.

### **Treating molluscum contagiosum**

Routine treatment for MC, particularly in children, is generally not recommended because:

- the infection usually clears up on its own
- the infection doesn't normally cause any symptoms other than the spots
- the infection doesn't usually interfere with everyday activities, such as going to work, swimming or playing sports
- treatments can be painful and may cause scarring or damage to the surrounding skin

Treatment is usually only recommended for older children and adults when the spots are particularly unsightly and affect quality of life, or for people with weakened immune systems.

In such cases, treatments that may be offered include:

- liquids, gels or creams that are applied directly to the skin
- minor procedures such as cryotherapy (where the spots are removed by freezing them)

Read more about [treating MC](#).

## Preventing the spread of molluscum contagiosum

Although MC is infectious, the chance of passing it on to others during normal activities is small.

It's not necessary to stay away from work, school or nursery, or to stop doing activities such as swimming if you have MC.

However, you should take some steps to avoid spreading the virus to other people. You should:

- avoid squeezing or scratching the spots – as well as increasing the risk of the infection spreading, this can cause pain, bleeding and can lead to scarring
- keep affected areas of skin covered with clothing whenever possible – a waterproof bandage can be put over the area if you go swimming
- avoid sharing towels, flannels and clothing
- avoid sharing baths

Using a [condom](#) while having sex can reduce the risk of passing on MC during sexual contact.

## Complications of molluscum contagiosum

MC rarely causes any other problems but complications can occasionally occur. These include:

- a bacterial infection – which may require treatment with [antibiotics](#)
- [scarring](#) – after MC has healed and cleared, small patches of paler skin or tiny indented [scars](#) may be left behind; this is more likely if the spots became infected or after treatment
- eye problems – a secondary eye infection may develop, such as [conjunctivitis](#) or keratitis, which may cause your eyes to become sore and sensitive to light

See your GP if you suspect a bacterial infection or experience any eye problems. Signs of a bacterial infection can include redness, swelling and pain in the skin and underlying tissue.

Information taken from the NHS website: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/molluscum-contagiosum/>