

Genital molluscum contagiosum – Patient information leaflet

Key points

Genital molluscum contagiosum is a sexually transmitted infection. It is caused by the *Molluscum contagiosum* virus and is a benign skin infection. Diagnosis is established on clinical grounds. In healthy individuals, it usually resolves spontaneously in 6–12 months. Active treatment is required in case of patient preference and in selected cases. It is contagious, and the use of condoms is not always protective.

What is genital molluscum contagiosum?

- ❖ Genital molluscum contagiosum is a sexually transmitted infection. It is caused by the *Molluscum contagiosum* virus which leads to a benign skin infection.

How do you get genital molluscum contagiosum?

- ❖ Direct skin-to-skin contact during sexual intercourse is the most common way of transmitting genital *Molluscum contagiosum*.
- ❖ Other ways of transmission might include swimming or co-bathing and spread via the sharing of towels/sponges.
- ❖ Transmission to newborns during birth is also possible.

What are the symptoms of genital molluscum contagiosum?

- ❖ Genital molluscum contagiosum may appear after 2 weeks or up to 6 months after contact.
- ❖ Lesions are dome-shaped, with smooth surface, pearly, skin-coloured, pink, yellow or white, 2–5 mm in diameter, firm, usually located on the external genitalia.
- ❖ Other affected regions may be the inguinal folds, the inner thighs or the suprapubic region, the areola and nipple, cervix, the oral mucosa or the palms and feet.
- ❖ Genital molluscum contagiosum is usually asymptomatic; local itch or discomfort may appear in some cases.
- ❖ Lesions may vary in number from 1 to hundreds and may appear grouped or in lines.

Do I need any tests?

- ❖ Genital molluscum contagiosum is usually diagnosed on clinical grounds. Histopathology is specific and confirmatory in doubtful or atypical cases.
- ❖ Laboratory investigations are required to screening for other sexually transmitted infections, such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea, HIV and syphilis.

What is the treatment for genital molluscum contagiosum?

- ❖ If you are otherwise well and healthy, genital molluscum contagiosum is harmless and usually resolves spontaneously in 6–12 months.
- ❖ However, as it is contagious, you should reduce the local spread of infection by avoiding scratching, shaving and waxing the affected area(s); you should try to keep the affected area(s) covered.
- ❖ Management of genital molluscum contagiosum may involve watchful waiting (if you are healthy, they may settle on their own) or active treatment if you prefer not to wait, if your lesions are extensive or persistent, for cosmetic reasons or if you develop symptoms or complications (such as itch, inflammation and secondary infection).
- ❖ Treatment may include physical therapies (curettage, cauterization, liquid nitrogen cryotherapy), topical therapies (podophyllotoxin, potassium hydroxide, benzoyl peroxide etc.) or other therapies in selected cases.

Should I have sex if I have genital molluscum contagiosum?

- ❖ You should avoid sexual contact until completion of treatment and total remission of lesions since intimate skin-to-skin contact is sufficient for transmission.
- ❖ Condom use may reduce the risk of transmission, but only if all molluscum lesions are covered by the condom, which is usually not the case.

What are the possible complications of genital molluscum contagiosum?

- ❖ Complications of genital molluscum contagiosum include bacterial superinfection or cellulitis.
- ❖ Immunosuppressed patients tend to develop extensive, confluent, giant, multiple and/or widespread lesions.
- ❖ Patients suffering from atopic eczema tend to develop widespread molluscum lesions, which may not be limited to the visible eczema lesions.
- ❖ An eczema type reaction, entitled molluscum dermatitis, consisting of redness, scales and inflamed lesions may appear secondary to a local immune response.

Genital molluscum contagiosum and pregnancy

- ❖ If you are pregnant, genital molluscum contagiosum can be passed from you to your baby during childbirth.
- ❖ Furthermore, active treatment is advised only using physical therapies (such as cryotherapy), which are safe during pregnancy.

Do I need to tell my partner?

- ❖ If you were diagnosed with genital molluscum contagiosum, you should tell your current sexual partner(s) in order to avoid re-infection and onward transmission, and also so your partners do not develop complications.

Further help and information

- ❖ If you suspect that you have genital molluscum contagiosum or any other sexually transmitted infection, then see your family doctor or local sexual health or the venereology/dermatology clinic.