What is molluscum contagiosum?

Molluscum contagiosum is a common and contagious viral infection that causes small, firm wart-like lumps anywhere on the body. It usually occurs in school-age children. It also occurs in adults where it is commonly found on the genitals, inner thighs and abdomen and is usually sexually transmitted.

What is the cause?

Molluscum contagiosum is caused by a poxvirus. It is contagious and spreads by direct contact from person to person although some may be transmitted indirectly.

Children usually pick up the infection from family members or other infected people with whom they swim or bathe. The incubation period can vary from 2-26 weeks. The infection can be spread by scratching and from cortisone therapy. People with a depressed immune system are prone to the infection.

What are the signs and symptoms?

The mollusca are small, firm and white or pearly lumps shaped like domes. Each lump is 3-5mm in diameter and has a central depression rather like a small pit. Some lumps may grow to as large as 10mm. They are filled with a cheesy like fluid. The lumps can be solitary or multiple (more common). The lumps do not hurt or itch but can cause eye irritation if present on the eyelid.

Where are the lumps found in children?

They can be found anywhere on the body but are more common on the face, the trunk and the flexures such as armpits and back of knees. Although they can be generalised they tend to be confined to a particular region.

What are the complications?

The problem is not dangerous but patients can develop dermatitis or a bacterial infection. Scarring can occur with larger lumps. People with HIV infection can get a very profuse outcrop which is difficult to treat. If untreated, just a few lumps can increase rapidly over a few weeks and can keep appearing for up to one year. However, all lumps will eventually disappear by themselves when the body’s immune system is able to respond and destroy them. This rejection usually takes 6-24 months but can take years.

What is the treatment?

Preventing spread

Avoid scratching the lumps, which may cause them to spread. Sharing baths should be avoided.

Specific treatment

There are 101 different treatments but no magic one. It is not advisable to use painful methods such as deep pricking and lancing in children with small uncomplicated lumps (children under 10 years do not tolerate painful methods very well). There are various tricks of the trade to stimulate the immune response.

• The most effective method is to extract the core with a needle or curette — performed professionally. It is best to avoid antibiotic and cortisone ointments for inflamed lumps.

Other methods include:

• For large areas, aluminum acetate (Burow’s solution, 1:30) twice daily can be effective.

• For smaller areas, dabbing of benzyl peroxide 2.5% or 10% povidone-iodine (Betadine) after gently lifting open the tip of the lump with a sterile needle inserted from the side (parallel to the skin) is worthwhile. It can then be covered with low allergy paper-based tape such as Micropore. A simple but protracted method is to cover the lump or lumps with this tape only and replace it each day.

• Apply liquid nitrogen and cover with dry dressings for two weeks. This method works better in adults.