

Public health advice for sex workers on monkeypox

30 September 2022

Overview

An outbreak of monkeypox, a viral infectious disease, is currently being reported in countries where the disease had not been found before. The risk of monkeypox is not limited to any one community or any one place. Anyone who has close contact with someone who is infectious is at risk.

Outbreaks of monkeypox in newly affected countries have mostly been identified in communities of gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men who have had recent sexual contact with a new partner or partners. Communities of trans and gender diverse people linked to the same sexual networks have also been affected.

We know that this outbreak is concerning, especially for people who are unwell, their partners, families and communities, and for people whose work require close contact with others, including male, female and transgender sex workers. Many sex workers will struggle financially if they are unable to work either by avoiding close contact with clients who have monkeypox or while isolating because they have suspected or confirmed monkeypox. This issue is likely to be particularly acute where there is no social protection or financial support available from their governments in their setting.

Some sex worker-led organizations established mutual aid schemes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar schemes may be possible in your country if organizations are beginning to develop emergency response funds for emerging health crises that prevent sex workers from earning an income. Identifying, establishing and raising awareness about these schemes is essential to create an environment in which sex workers can protect themselves and others from transmission.

How to use this document

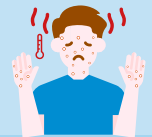
This document includes public health advice for sex workers of all genders on protecting themselves and others against monkeypox. It is intended for use by sex workers, sex worker-led organisations, community leaders, advocates, health service providers (especially those in sexual health service delivery) and organisations working to promote the health of sex workers.

The information in this document can be used as a basis for formal and informal community conversations, information sessions, or producing community information, to inform sex workers on how to protect themselves and others. The information included here can and should be adapted to the local context and sex work setting depending on the needs of the community.

THE SHORT READ

Key points about monkeypox

Monkeypox is caused by a virus. Symptoms can include a rash, fever or body aches, among others.



Monkeypox can spread through touching, kissing, and oral, vaginal and anal sex.



To protect yourself and others:

- Know the symptoms and check yourself regularly
- Have open conversations with close contacts where it is safe to do so
- Avoid close contact with someone who has it
- Seek health advice and get tested if you have been exposed or have symptoms
- Isolate if you have monkeypox, whenever possible
- Get vaccinated if it is available to you



Having or being exposed to monkeypox is nothing to be ashamed of.

Anyone can get monkeypox.

Let's take care of each other and get rid of monkeypox together.



PAHO



THE LONG READ

What you need to know about monkeypox

The current outbreak of monkeypox is mainly affecting mostly communities of gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men through sexual contact. However, anyone who has sexual or other types of close contact with an infected person can become infected with monkeypox.

Symptoms

If you are exposed to someone with monkeypox you could develop symptoms up to 21 days later. The most common symptoms of monkeypox include:

- Swollen lymph nodes
- Rash
- Fever
- Headache
- Muscle aches
- Back pain
- Low energy

The rash can affect the face, palms of the hands, soles of the feet, groin, genital and/or anal regions. It may also be found in the mouth, throat, anus, rectum or vagina, or on the eyes. The number of sores can range from one to several thousand.

Complications from monkeypox include skin or lung infections (pneumonia), confusion, and eye problems. Other complications include inflammation or sores inside the rectum that can cause severe pain (proctitis), and pain or difficulty when urinating.

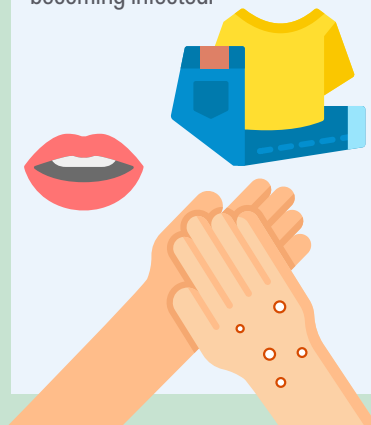


How monkeypox spreads

Monkeypox spreads through close contact with someone who has monkeypox, for example:

- Skin-to-skin contact (such as touching or vaginal/anal sex)
- Mouth-to-mouth contact (such as kissing)
- Mouth-to-skin contact (such as oral sex or kissing the skin)
- Face-to-face contact (such as talking, breathing or singing close to one another)
- Touching the same clothing, bedding, towels, objects, electronic gadgets, surfaces or sex toys

People with monkeypox are infectious until all their lesions have crusted over, the scabs have fallen off and a new layer of skin has formed underneath, and all the sores on the eyes and in the body (in the mouth, throat, eyes, anus, rectum or vagina) have healed too. This can take several weeks, during which it is strongly recommended for the person to self-isolate to protect others from becoming infected.



Monkeypox and HIV

People with underlying immune deficiencies may be at risk of more serious illness from monkeypox. People living with HIV who know their status and are well-controlled on treatment can reach the point of viral suppression.

This means that their immune systems are less vulnerable to other infections than they would be without treatment.

Studies are underway to better understand these questions.

So far, people living healthily with HIV who have developed monkeypox in this outbreak have not reported worse health outcomes than others. If you are living with HIV and think you may have monkeypox, seek advice from a trusted health worker.



THE LONG READ

How to reduce your risk of monkeypox

Know your own risk

Keep up to date about the risk of monkeypox in your area. Check yourself regularly for symptoms. If you have new and unusual rashes or sores, you should avoid having sex or any other kind of close contact with other people (if it is possible to do so) until you have had been checked for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and for monkeypox.

Remember that the rash can also be found in places that can be hard to see inside the body, including the mouth, throat, genitals, vagina, anus or rectum.



Have open conversations

Have open, non-judgmental conversations with close contacts, partners and clients. If safe, appropriate and possible, swap contact details so that you can let each other know if you get symptoms, even if you were not planning to see each other again.



Avoid close contact

If it is possible, avoiding close contact with family, friends, housemates, partners or clients who have confirmed or suspected monkeypox can effectively reduce your risk. If a client has symptoms that could be monkeypox, consider waiting until after they have a test result to have sex.



Clean regularly

Clean your hands regularly using soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Wash clothing, bedding, towels, objects and surfaces more often than usual. For example, change towels and bedsheets between clients, if possible.

Use detergent and water > 60 degrees Celsius. Clean objects, surfaces, sex toys and electronic gadgets more often than usual with soap and water and household disinfectant.



Consider harm reduction approaches

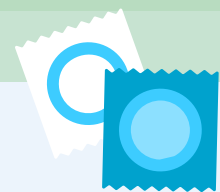
One way to reduce your risk of monkeypox is to consider reducing your number of sexual partners, if it is realistic for you to do so.

We don't currently know whether monkeypox can be spread through semen, vaginal or other bodily fluids.

Using or wearing a condom will very likely reduce your risk or extent of exposure during sex and it will help protect you and others from a range of other STIs. Condoms may not protect you from monkeypox during skin-to-skin, mouth-to-skin or mouth-to-mouth contact.

Using condoms also helps anyone who has recovered from monkeypox prevent transmission to others when having any form of sex, for up to 12 weeks following recovery from a monkeypox infection.

Covering skin with clothing may also reduce your risk by limiting skin-to-skin contact.



Get vaccinated if possible

If it is available to you, WHO recommends that people with multiple sexual partners get vaccinated against monkeypox. This provides you with an extra level of protection in addition to the other measures listed here. Remember that vaccines take several weeks to take effect, and no vaccine offers 100% protection. You may still pass the virus on to others after being vaccinated.



THE LONG READ

What to do if you have suspected or confirmed monkeypox

Having or being exposed to monkeypox is nothing to be ashamed of. Anyone can get monkeypox. Stereotyping, stigmatizing, blaming or shaming people because of a disease is never acceptable. Stigma makes it harder to end outbreaks and can stop people from accessing services. Don't allow fear of judgment to stop you from seeking trusted healthcare and social support you need if you have symptoms that could be monkeypox.

Seek advice and get tested

If you have symptoms or have been a close contact of someone with monkeypox, contact a health worker for advice, testing and medical care. Self-isolate where possible while waiting for a test and avoid close contact with others. Mention to your health care provider that you think your symptoms could be monkeypox or that you have been exposed.



Recovering from monkeypox

If you do test positive for monkeypox, you will need to isolate from others until your rash has crusted over, the scabs have fallen off and a new layer of skin grown underneath. This will help protect anyone else from becoming infected.

Your healthcare provider will give you advice on how to take care of yourself and whether you should recover at home or in hospital. Keep hydrated, eat well and get enough sleep. Use medication for pain and fever if needed. Take care of your rash: avoid scratching; keep lesions dry and uncovered; clean rash with sterilized water/antiseptic; rinse lesions in your mouth with saltwater; take warm baths with baking soda/Epsom salts; and use paracetamol to manage the pain, if needed.

Keep in touch with a health worker and seek immediate advice if your rash becomes more painful, shows signs of being infected (such as fever, redness or pus), if your fever, nausea or vomiting get worse, if you are unable to eat or drink, have difficulty breathing or if you feel dizzy or confused.



Communicating with recent contacts

If you have had close contact (including sex) with anyone in the previous 21 days, consider telling them about your diagnosis so that they can be alert to symptoms and get tested, if possible. Health workers might be able to help you pass on the information to your previous contacts anonymously if you do not feel able to do so.



Protecting other people

If you have monkeypox, you will need to self-isolate until you are no longer infectious. Your healthcare provider will help you decide if you should be cared for in hospital or at home. This will depend on how serious your symptoms are, whether you have risk factors that put you at risk of more serious symptoms, and whether you can minimize the risk of infecting anyone you live with.

If you are isolating at home, protect others you live with by:

- Isolating in a separate room
- Using a separate bathroom, or cleaning after each use
- Cleaning frequently touched surfaces and soap and water and a household disinfectant and avoiding sweeping/vacuuming
- Using separate utensils, towels, objects, electronic gadgets and bedding
- Doing your own laundry, and putting materials in a plastic bag before carrying it to the washing machine
- Opening windows throughout the house to keep the space well-ventilated

If you can't avoid being in the same room as someone else, avoid touching, clean hands often, cover your rash with clothing or bandages, wear well-fitting medical masks and open windows.



Avoiding and addressing stigma and discrimination

Having or knowing someone with monkeypox can be distressing. If someone within your community discloses to you that they have monkeypox, react without being judgmental or making any assumptions about how they have become infected. Respect their wishes as to whether they want other people to know about their illness or not.

Do all you can to help those self-isolating, including doing their shopping and checking in with them regularly. Fortunately, most people will recover fully within three weeks of their infection. Giving people an opportunity to talk about their concerns and feelings can also help. Encourage them to take care of their mental health, to eat well, stay hydrated and do exercise if possible.

