

Public health advice on the recent outbreak of monkeypox in the WHO European Region

24 May 2022

An outbreak of a disease called monkeypox is currently taking place in many countries of the WHO European Region, where cases have not typically been reported in the past. This can be concerning, especially for people whose loved ones or communities have been affected. Some infected people have been identified through clinics for sexually transmitted infections in population groups of gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men.

It is important to note that monkeypox is not limited to men who have sex with men, although most of the current cases are from this community. Anyone who has close contact with someone who is infectious can catch monkeypox, regardless of their sexual orientation. It is wrong to stigmatize anyone.

While everyone can catch monkeypox, not everyone is at equal risk. People who closely interact with someone who is infectious are at greater risk for infection; this includes household members, sexual partners, commercial sex workers and health workers.

Learning about monkeypox and targeting health information and advice to those who are at highest risk of infection will help ensure that as few people as possible are affected and that the outbreak can be stopped.

How to use this document

This document contains information on how monkeypox spreads, what to do if you think you have symptoms, and how to protect yourself and others. It can be used by community leaders, influencers, health workers and people attending social events and parties to inform and engage with individuals and communities, including gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men.

Information on this outbreak is evolving rapidly as we learn more. Check euro.who.int for the most up-to-date information.

What you need to know

Monkeypox is a virus that causes a disease with the same name. Its incubation period is between five and 21 days. Monkeypox is often self-limiting, meaning symptoms usually go away within 2–4 weeks without treatment.

Symptoms

Symptoms can be mild to severe. They include:

- rash with blisters on face, hands, feet, eyes, mouth and/or genitals (a genital and perianal rash has been reported most commonly in the current outbreak);
- fever;
- swollen lymph nodes;
- headaches;
- muscle aches; and
- low energy

Young children, pregnant women and immunosuppressed persons are at higher risk of developing severe disease from monkeypox.

Transmission

Monkeypox doesn't spread easily between people, but you can catch the disease through close physical contact with someone who is showing symptoms. It can be spread through:

- body fluids (pus or blood) from skin lesions or scabs;
- respiratory droplets (saliva or secretions) during prolonged and close face-to-face contact;
- bedding, towels, clothes or other belongings used by someone with symptoms; and
- sex contact or intercourse (skin-to-skin contact, including kissing, touching, and oral and penetrative sex).

Prevention

Take steps to protect yourself during the current outbreak in Europe by:

- avoiding skin-to-skin or face-to-face contact with anyone who has symptoms;
- practising safe sex; and
- keeping your hands clean, especially before and after contact with a symptomatic person and their belongings.

Detection and care

If you develop a rash accompanied by fever or feelings of discomfort or illness, talk to your health-care provider and get tested for monkeypox.

If you're confirmed as having monkeypox, you should isolate until the scabs have fallen off, avoid skin-to-skin contact and abstain from sex.

During this period, you can get treatment to ease monkeypox symptoms. Anyone caring for you should take appropriate protective measures (such as practising hand hygiene, wearing personal protective equipment, and managing laundry and waste safely).

Answers to common questions about monkeypox

1. What is monkeypox?

Monkeypox is a disease caused by the monkeypox virus. It is commonly found in central and west Africa and is occasionally identified in other countries. It is called monkeypox because it was first detected in monkeys. An outbreak is currently taking place in numerous countries in the WHO European Region and other regions that do not typically have cases.

2. What are the symptoms of monkeypox?

Symptoms of monkeypox typically include a fever, intense headache, muscle aches, back pain, low energy, swollen lymph nodes and, most typically, a skin rash or lesions. The rash usually begins within 1–3 days of the start of a fever. Lesions can be flat or slightly raised, filled with clear or yellowish fluid, and can then crust, dry up and fall off. The number of lesions on one person can range from a few to several thousand. The rash tends to be concentrated on the face, palms of the hands and soles of the feet. A genital and perianal rash has been reported mostly commonly in the current outbreak.

Symptoms typically last between two and four weeks and go away on their own without treatment. In some individuals, they can lead to medical complications and, rarely, death. People with underlying immune deficiencies, young children and pregnant women may be at risk of more serious symptoms.

3. How does monkeypox spread?

People with monkeypox are infectious while they have symptoms (normally 2–4 weeks). You can catch monkeypox through close physical contact with someone who has symptoms. The rash, bodily fluids (such as fluid, pus or blood from skin lesions) and scabs are particularly infectious. Clothing, bedding, towels or objects like eating utensils/dishes that have been contaminated with the virus from contact with an infected person can also infect others.

Ulcers, lesions or sores in the mouth can be infectious, meaning the virus can spread through saliva. People who closely interact with someone who is infectious, including health workers, household members, sexual partners and commercial sex workers, are therefore at greater risk for infection.

4. What should I do if I think I have monkeypox?

If you think you have symptoms or have been a close contact of someone with monkeypox, get in touch with your health worker for advice, testing and medical care. If possible, self-isolate and avoid close contact with others, including abstaining from sex. Take the steps listed above to protect people close to you from becoming infected.

5. Can monkeypox spread through sex?

Monkeypox can spread through close skin-to-skin contact during sex, including kissing, touching, and oral and penetrative sex with someone who has symptoms. Monkeypox rashes or skin lesions have been found on genitals and in the mouth, which is likely to contribute to transmission during sexual contact. Mouth-to-skin contact could cause transmission where skin or mouth lesions are present.

It currently is not known whether monkeypox can be spread through semen or vaginal fluids. People who have symptoms should avoid sexual contact with others and, until we know more, should continue using condoms after they recover.

6. How can I protect myself against monkeypox?

You can reduce your risk by avoiding close contact, including sexual contact, with people who have suspected or confirmed monkeypox.

If you need to have close contact with someone who has symptoms, encourage them to self-isolate or cover any skin lesion if they can (with a light bandage or clothing over the rash, for instance). When you are physically close to each other, both of you should wear a medical mask. Avoid skin-to-skin contact whenever possible and use disposable gloves if you have any direct contact with lesions.

Regularly clean your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub, especially after contact with the person who is infected, their clothes, bed sheets, towels and other items or surfaces they have touched or with which they may have come into contact, or their rash or respiratory secretions (from utensils and dishes, for example). You should wash clothes, towels, bedsheets and eating utensils with warm water and detergent and wear a mask when handling any clothes or bedding. Clean and disinfect any contaminated surfaces and dispose of contaminated waste (such as dressings) appropriately.

7. Some cases in this outbreak have been identified among communities of men who have sex with men. Why is this?

Monkeypox is spread from person to person through close contact. The risk of monkeypox is not limited to men who have sex with men. Anyone who has close contact with someone who is infectious is at risk.

One possible explanation for cases of monkeypox during this outbreak being reported more commonly in communities of men who have sex with men is that these communities may be more aware of health risks and seek care more often. Monkeypox rashes can resemble some sexually transmitted diseases, including herpes and syphilis, which may explain why these cases are being picked up at clinics for sexually transmitted infections. It is likely that as we learn more, we may identify cases in the broader community.

8. Should festivals, mass gatherings and parties be cancelled this summer?

Not at all, but it's what people do at these festivals and parties that matters, because sexual contact with multiple partners could put people at higher risk of being infected or spreading monkeypox unknowingly. We need to be aware of what can be done to minimize the risk and be vigilant in protecting each other and the community.

People should enjoy themselves, but in a safe way. Think about how to lower your risk by, for example, engaging in safe sexual behaviour, limiting the number of your sexual partners, practising good hygiene like regular handwashing and avoiding close physical contact with someone who has symptoms consistent with the disease.

9. Where can I learn more about monkeypox?

Find more information on monkeypox in the European Region [here](#). Check your local official sources for the situation near you.