

Public health advice on mpox (monkeypox) for gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men

An outbreak of mpox (monkeypox), a viral infectious disease, has been ongoing in several countries where the disease had not been found before since May 2022. Anyone who has close contact with someone who is infectious is at risk. Cases of mpox 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.

Learning more about mpox can help people protect themselves and help stop its transmission. Know your risk to lower your risk.

How to use this document: The advice in this document is intended for use by individuals, organizations, community leaders, influencers, health workers and others affected by or working on the mpox outbreak. It contains information to help people reduce their risk of mpox and to help slow the spread of the virus. This is the third version of this publication – it has been updated based on current public health advice.

Information about mpox is evolving rapidly. Advice may change as we learn more. Check www.who.int for the most up-to-date information.

THE SHORT READ

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

Mpox can spread through touching, kissing, and oral, vaginal and anal sex. Transmission may, less frequently, also occur through respiratory droplets and contact with contaminated materials.

In many countries, where cases of mpox have been reported for the first time, most people diagnosed with mpox are gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men who are getting this infection through sexual contact. Having multiple sexual partners increases your risk of being in direct contact with someone with mpox.

To protect yourself and others:

- Stay informed about the risk of mpox in your community.
- Know the symptoms and check yourself regularly.

- Have open conversations with close contacts, including sexual partners, where it is safe to do so.
- Avoid close contact with someone who has it.
- Seek health advice and monitor closely for symptoms if you have been exposed.
- Get tested if you have symptoms compatible with mpox.
- Isolate yourself if you have mpox.
- Get vaccinated if this is available to you.
- Keep taking steps to protect yourself and others, even after you have been vaccinated.

Help combat misinformation by sharing only reliable, evidence based and non-stigmatizing information from trustworthy sources.



Having or being exposed to mpox is nothing to be ashamed of. Anyone can get mpox. Let's take care of each other and get rid of mpox together.

What you need to know about mpox

In the newly affected countries, mpox is mostly affecting some gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men through sexual contact. However, anyone who has close contact with someone with mpox can get it. Transmission can also occur through respiratory droplets (such as through kissing, coughing or sneezing) and contact with contaminated materials, such as bedding, towels, objects, electronics and surfaces.

Symptoms

If you are exposed to someone with mpox you could develop symptoms up to 21 days afterwards. The most common symptoms include:

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

The rash looks like blisters or sores in the skin, affecting the face, palms of the hands, soles of the feet, groin, genital and/or anal regions. These lesions 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 hundred. Some people develop inflammation inside the rectum that can cause severe pain (proctitis). Severe complications may include bacterial infection of skin lesions, mpox affecting the brain (encephalitis) or lungs (pneumonia), and eye problems.

How mpox spreads

Among humans, mpox spreads through close physical contact with someone who has mpox, 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 or surfaces

In some settings, mpox can also spread from an animal carrying the virus to a person. People with mpox can be infectious for several weeks, at least until all the lesions and sores in their bodies have healed. Skin lesions are healed when they have crusted over, the scabs have fallen off and a new layer of skin has formed underneath. During the recovery process, it is recommended that people with mpox self-isolate to protect others from getting this illness.

Sexual health, HIV, and mpox

If you think you are at risk or have been diagnosed with mpox, you may benefit from testing for sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) from trusted services. This includes testing for HIV if you do not know your status. If you are HIV negative, discuss with your health care provider whether you would benefit from taking HIV PrEP.

If you are living with HIV, continue to take your HIV medication as directed, if it is accessible to you. If you think you may have mpox, seek advice from a trusted health worker. People living with HIV who achieve viral suppression through antiretroviral treatment are not at any higher risk of severe mpox.

Evidence suggests that immunosuppressed people, including people with untreated HIV and advanced HIV disease, are at higher risk of developing severe mpox and death. Symptoms of severe mpox include larger, more widespread lesions (especially in the mouth, eyes, and genitals), secondary bacterial infections of the skin or blood and lung infections. The data shows worst symptoms in people who are severely immunosuppressed (with CD4 count less than 200 cells/mm³).

People whose immune system is weakened, such as those with undiagnosed or untreated HIV, are at risk of more severe mpox if they are exposed. Many people living with HIV know their status, are well-controlled on treatment and reach HIV viral suppression. This means that their immune systems are less vulnerable to other infections than they would be without treatment.

Severe mpox cases seen in some countries highlight the urgent need to increase equitable access to mpox vaccines and therapeutics, and to HIV prevention, testing and treatment. Without this, most affected groups are being left without the tools they need to protect their sexual health and wellbeing.

How to reduce your risk of mpox

Know your own risk

Keep up to date about the risk of mpox in your area and in your community. Check yourself regularly for symptoms, particularly if you have new or multiple sexual partners or have recently engaged in group sex or chemsex (use of recreational drugs during sex). If you have new and unusual rashes or sores, you should avoid having sex or any other kind of close contact with other people and seek medical advice.

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, and people may have this infection without knowing.

Manage your risk

Avoiding close contact with people who have mpox is the most effective way to avoid catching it. If someone you live with has confirmed or suspected mpox, there are some simple steps

you can take to protect yourself. Avoid being in the same room as someone with mpox, including sharing linens and beddings, and keeping objects and surfaces clean. Wash your hands frequently with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub. Avoid sharing personal items including bedding, towels, utensils, and electronic devices. Monitor yourself for symptoms of mpox for 21 days after your last close contact with someone with mpox, and avoid sexual contact with others.

If mpox is being transmitted in your area and you are sexually active, you can take steps to reduce your risk of being exposed. You may choose to reduce the number of sexual partners you have. If you do have sex with someone new, you can consider having open and non-judgmental conversations about the risk and whether any of you have current symptoms, if it is safe to do so. Consider swapping contact details with your close contacts so that you can let each other know if one of you gets mpox.

Condoms prevent some STIs. They will not protect you from acquiring mpox through close physical contact. If used correctly, condoms may reduce exposure to mpox, and the severity of genital or anal symptoms.

Get vaccinated

Some countries are offering vaccination for mpox. If this is available to you, WHO recommends that people who are at high risk of being exposed to mpox get vaccinated. This includes gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men with multiple sexual partners. Getting vaccinated if you are eligible 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. Continue to protect yourself and others from mpox, even after being vaccinated.

What to do if you have suspected or confirmed mpox

Take care of your physical and mental health. Having or being exposed to mpox is nothing to be ashamed of.

Seek advice and get tested

If you have been in contact with someone with confirmed mpox and have no symptoms, contact a health worker for advice. Monitor closely for symptoms if you have been exposed. Some people may be able to transmit mpox before symptoms show, so avoid sexual contact with other people if you have been exposed to mpox, regardless of whether you have symptoms or not.

If you have symptoms of mpox, 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 mpox. Don't allow fear of judgment to stop you from getting the support you need. Stigma can stop people from accessing services and makes it harder to end outbreaks. .

Recovering from mpox

If you do test positive for mpox, you will need to isolate from others until your rash has healed. This will help protect anyone else from getting this infection. Your healthcare provider will give you advice on how to take care of yourself. 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
- Clean rash with sterilized water/antiseptic
- Rinse lesions in your mouth with saltwater
- Take warm baths with baking soda/Epsom salts
- Use paracetamol to manage fever and pain, if needed
- Use lidocaine to manage discomfort of oral and perianal lesions

Keep in touch with a health worker and seek immediate advice if your rash becomes more

painful, or if it shows signs of being infected (such as fever, redness or pus). You should also seek advice if your pain, 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 mpox, you will need to self-isolate until you can't pass it on. 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 passing it on to anyone you live with. If you are isolating at home, protect others you live with by:

- Isolating in a separate, well-ventilated room (e.g. with windows that can be opened frequently)
- Using a separate bathroom, or cleaning after each use
- Clean your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub frequently
- Clean and disinfect surfaces after using a shared space
- Using separate utensils, towels, objects, electronic gadgets and bedding
- Waste that is generated such as bandages, gloves and masks should be placed in strong bags and securely tied before disposal
- Doing your own laundry, and putting materials in a plastic bag before carrying it to the washing machine.

If you can't avoid being in the same room as someone else, avoid close contact with other

people and your pets, wash your hands often, cover your rash with clothing or bandages, and wear well-fitting medical masks. Avoid close contact with other people and pets in the home. Since it is possible that mpox can be spread through semen or vaginal fluids, people who have recovered from mpox are advised to use condoms when having all forms of sex for 3 months following recovery of mpox infection.

Avoiding and addressing stigma and discrimination

Having or knowing someone with mpox can be distressing. If someone within your community discloses to you that they have mpox, 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.

Where can I learn more about mpox?

Find answers to some of the most [common questions on mpox here](#), read other pieces of [WHO public health advice](#), or read the [WHO factsheet](#). Check your local official and community sources for updates on the situation near you. Many organizations supporting gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men, including HIV support organizations around the world, are already providing strong leadership in offering information and support to their communities to help prevent the spread of mpox. Their work, also increasingly supported by broader LGBTQIA+ organizations, is central to efforts to address stigma and discrimination as well as information sharing. Reach out to trusted organizations in your country to get more information. Reach out to trusted organizations in your country to get more information.

If you are having sex with multiple partners, seek regular screening for sexually transmitted infections and take PrEP where it is available. Seeking health advice regularly and quickly, if you have symptoms, will help you get treatment if needed and avoid you infecting anyone else.

Remember - condoms may not prevent mpox but can prevent other sexually transmitted infections.