

Monkeypox

Frequently asked questions

24 May 2022

What is monkeypox?

Monkeypox is a rare disease caused by infection with the monkeypox virus. It belongs to the same family as the smallpox virus but generally causes a milder illness.

Cases in humans primarily occur in tropical rainforest areas of Central and West Africa. In May 2022, an increasing number of cases have been reported outside of Africa including in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, Portugal and Spain. Many cases have no recent travel to Africa, indicating local transmission is likely occurring. Cases have also been reported in Australia.

Is monkeypox a concern?

Most people who have monkeypox infection recover within 2-4 weeks, however severe illness can develop in a small percentage of people. Children are at a higher risk of severe disease and death.

This is the first time that a large number of monkeypox cases have been detected outside of Africa. The reasons for the spread of monkeypox outside of Africa at this time are being investigated.

What are the signs and symptoms of monkeypox?

Symptoms may include fever, headache, muscle aches, backache, swollen lymph nodes, chills and tiredness. A rash develops within 1 to 3 days of the initial symptoms, which often starts on the face and spreads to other parts of the body. For some people, first symptoms may be a rash on the genital region. The rash starts as flat red lesions, which become raised, then fill with fluid and eventually crust and fall off over a period of 2-3 weeks.

Symptoms usually begin 6 to 13 days after contact with a person with monkeypox, but this can be as short as 5 days or as long as 21 days.

How does monkeypox spread?

Monkeypox does not spread easily between people.

Spread of monkeypox may occur when a person comes into close contact with an infected animal (such as rodents), an infected human or other materials contaminated with virus such as clothing or bedding. The virus enters the body through broken skin (even if breaks are not visible), the respiratory tract, or mucous membranes (eyes, nose or mouth).

Person-to-person spread may occur through:

- direct contact with monkeypox skin lesions or scabs
- contact with clothing or linens (such as bedding or towels) used by an infected person
- close exposure to the coughs or sneezes of an individual with a monkeypox rash.

Spread can occur during sexual intercourse from close contact as described above.

Who is at risk of monkeypox?

Anyone who has close prolonged contact with a person with monkeypox through contact with body fluid, monkeypox sores or shared items is at risk of developing the disease. Gay, bisexual or other men who have sex with men may be at increased risk, with a large proportion of cases detected overseas occurring amongst this group.

Who is at risk of severe disease with monkeypox?

Young children, pregnant women and immunosuppressed people may be at higher risk of severe disease with monkeypox.

How is monkeypox treated?

Most people with monkeypox will recover without any specific treatments. Simple pain medications and keeping up with oral fluids help to manage symptoms. Anti-viral medications may be used for people with severe disease.

How is monkeypox prevented?

People with monkeypox should isolate and avoid contact with other people while they are infectious. People are infectious from when they first have symptoms until all lesions of their rash scab over and fall off.

Vaccines against smallpox can be used to prevent monkeypox. High-risk contacts, who are most at risk of becoming infected with monkeypox, may be offered vaccination to prevent infection. Vaccination after exposure is most effective in the first 4 days after being exposed to monkeypox but can be given up to 14 days after exposure.

Can anyone be vaccinated against monkeypox?

The smallpox vaccine that can be used to prevent monkeypox is in limited supply and is not currently available to the general public.

What do I do if I have symptoms of monkeypox?

Anyone who develops symptoms, particularly if they have recently travelled overseas or had contact with a case, should call their GP for a telehealth appointment, or seek care at their nearest hospital. If going to hospital it is important to call ahead and wear a mask.

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