



**nswp** Global Network of Sex Work Projects  
Promoting Health and Human Rights

## **BRIEFING NOTE:**

# **Public health advice on monkeypox for sex workers**

### **Introduction**

This Briefing Note is intended to provide sex workers and sex worker-led organisations with information about monkeypox, so that sex workers can make informed choices and decisions.

NSWP is acutely aware that this comes on top of sex workers all over the world having experienced hardship, a total loss of income and increased criminalisation and harassment due to the continuing extreme challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a criminalised population, sex workers have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, often living in precarious economic situations, and excluded from social protection systems.

The advent of another infectious disease with the potential to impact on sex workers raises similar issues and realities which must be recognised, for example:

- Sex workers will not often have the choice in whether they continue to work during outbreaks because of the lack of other sources of income
- If exposed to, or infected with, monkeypox, isolating from others for prolonged periods of time will pose enormous challenges to sex workers
- Contact tracing or sharing contact details with clients is often unrealistic, impractical, or unsafe for most sex workers
- Criminalisation, stigma, and discrimination create additional barriers for sex workers when they access sexual and other health services. Identifying as a sex worker (or alternatively as a gay man) e.g., to gain access to a vaccine, if one is available for priority populations, can carry significant additional risks.

NSWP has worked with experts at the World Health Organization to provide sex workers with the best reliable, evidence-based, non-stigmatising information from trustworthy sources - so that they can protect themselves and their families and their loved ones.

Member organisations are encouraged to use the information contained in this Briefing Note and disseminate it widely. Organisations can adapt it to fit their local legal context, local vaccine and health service availability, and using different formats e.g., for specific sex work settings, or that best suit the way they interact with sex working communities.

### **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.

**NSWP | Mitchell House, 5/5 Mitchell Street | Edinburgh EH6 7BD | Scotland UK**  
**[secretariat@nswp.org](mailto:secretariat@nswp.org) | +44 (0)131 553 2555 | [www.nswp.org](http://www.nswp.org)**

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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 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 organisations established mutual aid schemes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar schemes may be possible in your country if organisations 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 a virus that can cause a rash, and other symptoms such as fever or body aches.
- Monkeypox can spread through touching, kissing, and oral, vaginal, and anal sex.
- To protect yourself and others:
  - o Know the symptoms and check yourself regularly
  - o Have open conversations with close contacts where it is safe to do so
  - o Avoid close contact with someone who has it
  - o Seek health advice and get tested if you have been exposed or have symptoms
  - o Isolate if you have monkeypox, whenever possible
  - o 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.

### **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.

### **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 sanitiser. Wash clothing, bedding, towels, objects, and surfaces more often than usual. For example, changing 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.

### ***Get vaccinated***

If it is available to you, WHO recommends sex workers 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.

### ***Consider other 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. Wearing a dental dam or covering skin with clothing may also reduce your risk by limiting skin-to-skin or mouth-to-skin contact.

### **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, stigmatising, 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 sterilised 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 minimise 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.

### **Respect and stigma**

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.

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