

Public health advice for sex workers on mpox

Overview

Mpox is a viral infection that is spreading in many countries. Anyone in close contact with someone infectious is at risk, but some people have an increased risk from mpox and should take additional precautions to protect themselves and their friends and their families from the virus.

Sex workers face unique challenges that increase their risk of exposure to mpox, which requires offering clear, practical and accessible guidance to help to protect their health and the health of their clients.

We know that this outbreak is concerning, especially for people who are unwell, their partners, families and communities and for people whose professions 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 mpox or while isolating because they have suspected or confirmed mpox. Sex workers may also be at increased risk of violence, for example, if they refuse to engage in sex during the outbreak.

This issue is likely to be especially acute if there is little or no social or other types of protection, such as childcare or financial support available.

Some sex worker-led organizations established mutual aid schemes during the COVID-19 pandemic, which supported sex workers' livelihoods when they needed to take a pause from work to care for themselves or their families or to limit contact with clients. Similar schemes may be possible in your location. Identifying, establishing and raising awareness about these schemes is essential to create an environment in which sex workers can protect themselves, their families and communities.

This document is based on current understanding of the transmission of mpox and related infection prevention and control measures. It aims to provide useful, common-sense advice for timely response to mpox outbreaks. This advice may evolve as new evidence becomes available. Keep up to date at www.who.int.

Who this document is for

This document includes public health advice for sex workers on protecting themselves, their clients and others in close contact against mpox. It is intended for use by sex workers, sex worker-led organizations, owners and managers of sex-on-premises venues, community leaders, advocates, organizations focused on addressing gender-based violence, health-care providers (especially those delivering sexual health care) and organizations 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 and their clients on how to protect themselves and others. By following these recommendations and advice, sex workers can reduce their risk of acquiring and spreading mpox, safeguard their health and access necessary health care and support.

The information included here can and should be adapted to the local context and sex work setting, depending on the needs and risks.



The short read



Key points about mpox



Mpox can spread through close person-to-person contact, including touching, kissing and oral, vaginal and anal sex with someone with mpox. In most countries, mpox outbreaks result from human-to-human transmission.



In developing interventions with your community, understanding the local modes of transmission well is essential. Where mpox is endemic in certain places in Africa, it can also spread through animal-to-human contact such as when hunting or preparing wild game for consumption as food. This can lead to further spread in the family or community.



Or it can spread through touching the same clothing, bedding, towels, objects, electronics, surfaces or sex toys used by someone who has mpox. Mpox can cause a rash and other symptoms such as enlarged lymph nodes, fever, headache, muscle aches, back pain and low energy.



Condoms prevent some sexually transmitted infections but 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.



To protect yourself and others:

- Know the symptoms and check yourself regularly.
- Have open conversations with close contacts.
- Avoid close contact with someone who has mpox or is showing symptoms.
- Do not use bedding, towels, clothing or any personal items that might have come into contact with a person who has mpox.
- Seek health advice and get tested if you have been exposed or have symptoms.
- Consider limiting the number of sexual partners if this is realistic.
- If you think you may have mpox, avoid sexual activity and close contact with others until you have been tested and evaluated by a health-care provider.
- Get vaccinated if an mpox vaccine is available to you.



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.



The long read



What you need to know about mpox

The current outbreak of mpox is affecting very different communities. Anyone who has close contact with an infected person can get mpox and may be able to spread the virus to others.

Symptoms

If you are exposed to someone with mpox you should watch for such symptoms as:

- rash
- fever
- headache
- swollen lymph nodes
- 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.

Symptoms most often develop within a few days of exposure but can develop up to 21 days (about three weeks) after being exposed to someone with mpox. Complications from mpox can include severe pain, skin or lung infections (pneumonia), confusion and eye problems. Other complications include inflammation or sores around the genitals and rectum. Mpox can lead to loss of pregnancy or severe illness of the baby, scarring or depigmentation of the skin or blindness. In some cases, mpox can be fatal, especially for infants, young children or people with a weakened immune system.



How mpox spreads

Mpox spreads through close contact with someone who has mpox, for example:

- skin-to-skin contact (such as touching or vaginal or 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 or breathing close to one another); and
- touching the same clothing, bedding, towels, objects, electronics, surfaces or sex toys

People with mpox are considered infectious until all their lesions have crusted over, the scabs have fallen off, 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. This can take several weeks, during which the person should consult a local health-care provider and isolate from others to protect them from becoming infected.

Mpox and HIV

People with underlying immunodeficiencies may be at higher risk of severe mpox.

People living with HIV who achieve viral suppression through antiretroviral therapy do not appear to have a higher risk of severe mpox than the general population. Using daily effective HIV treatment (antiretroviral medicine) reduces the risk of severe mpox symptoms if infected.

People with untreated HIV infection or advanced HIV disease may be immunocompromised and therefore have a greater risk of severe mpox and death.





How to reduce your risk of mpox

Know your own risk

Stay informed about the risk of mpox in your area. Check yourself regularly for symptoms. If you have new and unusual rashes or sores, avoid having sex or any other kind of close contact with other people (if this is possible) until you have been checked for sexually transmitted infections and mpox by a health-care provider. Remember that the rash can also be found in places that can be hard to see, including the mouth, throat, genitals, vagina, anus or rectum.

Have open conversations

Have open, non-judgemental conversations with close contacts, partners and clients if this is safe. If appropriate and possible, swap contact details so that you can tell each other if symptoms develop, even if you were not planning to see each other again. Combat misinformation by sharing only reliable, evidence-informed and non-stigmatizing information from trustworthy sources.

Avoid close contact

If possible, avoiding close contact with family, friends, housemates, partners or clients who have confirmed or suspected mpox can effectively reduce your risk.

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. Consider changing towels and bed sheets between clients, if possible. Use detergent and water, ideally hot water. Clean objects, surfaces, sex toys and electronics more often than usual with soap and water and household disinfectant.

Get tested

Individuals exhibiting symptoms of mpox who do not know their HIV status should be encouraged to get tested for HIV while getting tested for mpox. Testing for coinfection, including for HIV and sexually transmitted infections, should be considered routine clinical practice in sexual health services, and standard local guidance should be followed.

Get vaccinated

If it is available, get vaccinated against mpox. This provides extra protection in addition to the other measures listed here. Remember that vaccines take several weeks to become effective, and no vaccine offers 100% protection. You may still transmit the virus to others after being vaccinated.

Consider other risk-reduction approaches

One way to reduce your risk of mpox is to consider reducing the number of sexual partners, if this is realistic.

Use condoms. Condoms will not fully protect against mpox but may reduce the risk or extent of exposure and will help to protect you and others from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

The virus has been found in semen, but whether mpox can be spread through semen or vaginal fluids is currently not known. People with mpox are advised to use condoms for 12 weeks (about three months) after they recover.





What to do if you have suspected or confirmed mpox

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

Anyone can get mpox. Stereotyping, stigmatizing, blaming or shaming people because of a disease is never acceptable. Stigma makes ending outbreaks more difficult and can stop people from accessing services. Do not allow fear of judgement to stop you from seeking trusted health care and social support you need if you have symptoms that could be mpox.

Seek advice

If you have symptoms or have been in close contact with someone who has been diagnosed with mpox, contact a health-care worker for advice. They can examine you or organize testing if it is available in your area. Isolate at home if possible while waiting for a test or for your symptoms to subside and avoid close contact with others. Mention to your health-care provider that you think your symptoms could be caused by mpox or that you have been exposed to it.

Isolate and recover at home or in care

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

Your health-care provider will advise you about how to take care of yourself and whether you should recover at home or in a hospital. Keep hydrated, eat well and get enough sleep. Use medication for pain and fever if needed. Take care of your rash: avoid scratching since this will help to minimize any scars or marks once you recover; keep lesions dry and uncovered; clean the rash with sterilized water or antiseptic; rinse lesions in your mouth with salt water; take warm baths with baking soda or Epsom salts; and use paracetamol to manage the pain, if needed.

Keep in touch with a health-care worker and seek immediate advice if:

- your rash becomes more painful, shows signs of being infected (such as fever, redness or pus);
- your fever, nausea or vomiting get worse;
- you are unable to eat or drink;
- you have difficulty breathing; or
- you feel dizzy or confused.

Communicate with recent contacts

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

Protect other people

If you have mpox, you should isolate until you are no longer infectious. Your health-care provider can help you decide whether you should be cared for in a clinic or hospital or at home. This will depend on the availability of services and how serious your symptoms are, whether you have risk factors that increase the 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 with soap and water and a household disinfectant and avoiding sweeping and vacuuming;
- using separate utensils, towels, objects, electronics and bedding;
- doing your own laundry and putting materials in a plastic bag before carrying them to the washing machine; and
- opening windows throughout the house to keep the space well ventilated.

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





Responsibilities of and advice for owners and managers of sex-on-premises venues

Since the multicountry mpox outbreak started in 2022, clusters of mpox have been connected to sex-on-premises venues and events. Sex-on-premises venues can include saunas, sex clubs, bathhouses, tolerance houses or businesses with back rooms and dark rooms; events refer to both private and commercial sex-on-premises events. Special considerations and precautionary measures are necessary for venues and events where there is sex on the premises to reduce the risk of mpox for personnel, people attending venues or events and communities.

Here is practical advice to help reduce the risk of mpox transmission in sex-on-premises venues. It is intended to be adapted to your specific needs and can be used as a basis for community conversations, information sessions or producing community information for your communities:

- Clients who have had confirmed mpox should not have sex or close contact while they have active symptoms and then should use condoms for 12 weeks following recovery.
- Sex workers working in organized premises should be supported to safely deny sex if they have concerns about possible transmission. Give sex workers clear information and support about how to safely refuse sex with clients or insist on condom use. Displaying messages that clearly state that any aggression or violence toward sex workers or other clients will result in eviction and a ban can help to create a safe environment if appropriately enforced.
- Develop a plan for how to support clients who become infected with mpox during or after attending your premises, including providing details about relevant health-care services.
- Inform personnel and volunteers about how to protect themselves and others against mpox, the symptoms and what to do if someone at an event or venue develops symptoms.
- Develop a plan for how to support sex workers and other personnel if they get mpox through their work. They need support to take time to recover.
- Identify where clients can be referred for mpox testing or vaccination in your community.

Respect and stigma

Having or knowing someone with mpox can be distressing. If someone within your community tells you that they have mpox, react without being judgemental 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.

Some sex workers face stigma or discrimination in their daily lives. Stigma and discrimination towards any group or because of any disease is never acceptable.

