What is monkeypox?

Monkeys are a viral infection usually found in animals like squirrels and non-human primates. First identified in humans in 1970, monkeypox has similarities to the smallpox virus but is significantly less severe. Of note, smallpox was eradicated in 1980 as a result of widespread vaccination. Most cases of monkeypox resolve on their own in 2-4 weeks, but approximately 3-6% can die. In the current outbreak, none of the patients have died and the circulating strain appears to be a milder form.

What are the symptoms of monkeypox? How do I know if I have it?

Most cases take anywhere from 7-14 days after infection for symptoms to start. Early symptoms are similar to flu and COVID and include fever, headache, muscle aches, exhaustion and swollen lymph nodes. However, people with monkeypox do not usually have the cough or nasal congestion commonly seen in flu and COVID. These early symptoms may be mild or may not occur at all. Usually within 1-3 days of the flu-like symptoms, patients develop a flat rash that soon progresses to raised bumps, then blisters, then pus-filled bumps. Over the course of two weeks the rash scabs over and resolves. Of note, the rash and other symptoms can look very similar to syphilis, which is far more common in our community.

Because the number of cases of monkeypox in the US is still so low, flu-like symptoms and/or rashes are much more likely to have causes other than monkeypox. However, it is important to be aware of the symptoms of this virus in the rare instance of contact with an infected individual.

What should I do if I have symptoms that are concerning, or think I may have been exposed?

First, it is extremely unlikely that someone without a known exposure will become infected with monkeypox. That said, anyone who develops concerning symptoms of fever and rash should isolate themselves at home or somewhere safe and away from other people and immediately call to speak with their medical provider. Do not walk into the office but call ahead to make sure you can be evaluated and seen without putting others at risk. If you must leave the house to seek urgent medical care, be sure to wear a mask and cover any visible lesions under clothing.

How does monkeypox transmit?

Infection occurs through direct contact with the skin or body fluids of an infected individual, or through prolonged face-to-face contact. This can happen directly through sex and other intimate activities, or indirectly through contaminated items like bed sheets or towels. Unlike COVID, the virus is not airborne and is much more difficult to transmit. It can be transmitted in
large respiratory droplets from coughs and sneezes but these generally cannot travel more than a few feet. Casual contact with people in daily life is not known to transmit monkeypox. However, any prolonged physical contact with an infected individual (particularly skin-to-skin contact without clothing) can lead to transmission. There is risk of transmission in all sexual encounters without regard to the gender or sexual orientations of the people involved.

**How can I keep myself safe?**

The number of cases of monkeypox in the US is extremely low, including in men who have sex with men. To prevent transmission, the same masks, gowns, gloves, frequent handwashing and social distancing that are helping keep us safe from COVID will also protect us from monkeypox. If you have to touch a potentially infected person for some reason, be sure to use proper PPE and dispose of it immediately after contact in appropriate biohazard bags.

**Where is this current outbreak?**

Monkeypox is usually found in central and west African countries including Cameroon, DRC, Gabon and Nigeria. Since May 18, 2022, over 100 cases have been identified in over 20 countries. What is unusual is most of these cases have no history of travel to the areas of Africa where this virus normally lives. There are now a handful of confirmed cases of monkeypox in the US. As of May 25th, California has one suspected case of monkeypox but confirmation is still pending. Though numbers are still low, the World Health Organization has concerns that there may be many more cases not yet diagnosed.

**Are LGBTQ+ people at increased risk for monkeypox?**

It is true in Europe that gay and bisexual men make up most of the new monkeypox cases but this is likely a result of coincidental contact with infected people at one or more recent LGBTQ-focused events resulting in a cluster of cases within the community. Good public health should prevent men who have sex with men (MSM) from being singled out as it may result in medical providers missing cases of monkeypox in other populations. It also can lead to further shaming of LGBTQ+ people as our community continues to experience increased stigma related to sexuality and HIV/STIs. The Center will remain a source of judgement-free healthcare for anyone who is showing monkeypox symptoms or any other stigmatized health condition.

**Could monkeypox become the new COVID?**

This virus is nothing like COVID and has almost no chance of becoming a new global pandemic. Unlike COVID, monkeypox is transmitted only by prolonged physical contact with an infected individual. Casual contact like walking through a supermarket or spending time in a meeting is very unlikely to spread this virus. However, healthcare workers, household members and sexual partners of infected patients are more at risk. Proper use of PPE can drastically reduce this risk even with known cases.
Have there been other outbreaks of monkeypox in the US?

There were 2 travel related cases of monkeypox identified in the US in 2021. These individuals were isolated and there were not any additional infections associated with these individuals. In 2003, there was a larger outbreak in six US states and included forty-seven confirmed cases of monkeypox. As a result of active public health measures, the outbreak was swiftly contained.

What is the Center’s response to this current outbreak?

The Center is closely following the guidance of the CDC and LA County Department of Public Health. Protections put in place during COVID (including masking and physical spacing) are effective in preventing spread of any infectious disease including monkeypox. We will be working with nursing staff and medical providers on ways to distinguish between monkeypox symptoms and those of other infections like syphilis. If one of our patients, clients or staff is suspected to be infected with monkeypox, we will work closely with public health officials to address and contain any outbreak.