

Monkeypox: What is it?

Written by By Laura Chanchien Parajon and Justin Garoutte NMDOH
Friday, 02 September 2022 03:43



Monkeypox is a rare disease caused by the monkeypox virus, which is in the same family of viruses that cause smallpox but is much milder. There are currently 22 cases in the state, over 15,000 nationwide, and over 43,000 globally. Like any new disease impacting our state, we at the New Mexico Department of Health want to separate fact from fiction so residents can make informed choices to protect themselves.

Symptoms can include fever, chills, headache, muscle aches and backache, tiredness, and swollen lymph nodes. The best indicator that this is not another infection is a rash that can look like pimples or blisters that appear on the face, inside the mouth, and other parts of the body like hands, feet, chest, genitals, or anus. Some people get the rash before symptoms, or just the rash. While there have not been any deaths in the U.S., monkeypox is still something we need to avoid and prevent.

Monkeypox is spread from person to person through close, personal, and often skin-to-skin contact with the infectious rash, scabs, or body fluids. It can also be spread through respiratory secretions during prolonged face-to-face contact or during intimate physical contact like kissing, cuddling, and sex. Anyone in close, personal contact with a person infected with monkeypox can get it and should take steps to protect themselves.

While monkeypox is spreading throughout the U.S., we should remember that the risk of getting monkeypox for most people is low, and we do not have to be wiping down our groceries or doorknobs, like we did at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some have noted a lot of early cases among gay and bisexual men, but we have seen before that infectious diseases move among populations. Since we know that the highest risk is through close, personal contact including intimate and sexual activities, we can all take precautions.

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Since our case numbers are low right now, we have an opportunity to help prevent the spread of monkeypox as a community. There are three ways to prevent the spread:

Prevention Behaviors: Since monkeypox is primarily spread by contact, you have to come into either close physical contact with the monkeypox lesions or with items that touched the monkeypox lesions. Therefore, ways to avoid getting monkeypox include: 1) Avoiding skin-to-skin contact with people who have a rash that looks like monkeypox, 2) Avoiding contact with objects and materials that a person with monkeypox has used, and 3) Washing your hands often with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer, especially before eating or touching your face.

Get Tested: If you have a rash that looks like monkeypox, get tested right away. Tests are becoming more widely available in healthcare settings and can also be done at DOH Public Health Offices. Monkeypox testing is free, and you do not need to have an ID or insurance. If you test positive for monkeypox and are eligible for treatment, your provider will also be able to get you access to free treatment through the DOH.

Get Vaccines If Eligible: If you have been exposed or are at high risk for monkeypox, a free monkeypox vaccine is available. Based on CDC recommendations, the vaccine is currently being given to people who have been exposed to monkeypox as well as those who are at high risk of getting monkeypox. The vaccine has few side effects other than pain at the injection site.

We have seen impacted communities protect themselves, their sexual partners, and people in their households by registering for the vaccine. So far more than 1,000 people in New Mexico have already chosen to reduce their risk and have received their first of two shots.

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If you think you are at risk and are interested in a vaccine or testing, you can receive a confidential consultation with the DOH Call Center at 1-855-600-3453; option 4 for English; option 9 for Spanish. You can also register online at <https://monkeypoxnm.org/>. For more information about monkeypox visit <https://www.nmhealth.org/> and click on the monkeypox tab in the upper right corner.

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