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The ABC of monkeypox

INFECTION: INTIMATE CONTACT IS NEEDED FOR TRANSMISSION

⇢ It spreads during intercourse or kissing with a symptomatic person.

Lunga Simelane

With currently 3 552 confirmed monkeypox cases reported from 59 countries around the world, South Africans should be aware the monkeypox virus can only spread through close contact, according to experts.

Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (Caprisa) researcher and immunologist Dr Aida Sivro said the monkeypox virus spread through close or direct physical contact with infectious lesions, respiratory droplets (at close range) or contact with contaminated items such as clothing or linen.

According to Sivro, the best prevention would be raising awareness of risk factors and disease signs and symptoms, while educating people about the measures they could take to reduce exposure to the virus.

Sivro said people infected with the monkeypox virus would be infected when the carrier is symptomatic; therefore anyone who has been in contact with a positive case or anyone exhibiting signs and symptoms should self-isolate and seek medical care.

There is no vaccine available yet for the disease

"The standard prevention measures used for Covid will also work here, including staying away from people that are sick and practicing good hygiene by washing your hands with water and soap and using an alcohol-based sanitiser," she said.

Epidemiologist and consultant Rufaro Samanga said monkeypox was a disease which was quite rare in terms of humans but outbreaks did happen.

Samanga said this was the first time there was a multi-country outbreak, but it was not highly transmissible compared to Covid, which reached pandemic level. Monkeypox, in contrast, required very close physical contact.

"It is transmitted through physical contact such as cuddling, kissing and sexual intercourse with a person [who has] monkeypox," she said.

"The rates of infection should be much lower for the virus compared to Covid or influenza."

However, Samanga said the talks about vaccinations included "mass vaccinations" and in the interests of resources, it was not necessary for South Africa to look at monkeypox mass vaccinations.

"Containment and contact tracing which has already begun is sufficient," she said.

"But of course, as we monitor the spread of the virus within the country then we would be able to adjust and make a potentially different decision if necessary."

Experts warned against prejudice and stigmatising gay people or men who sleep with men, and Samanga said it was important to stress that monkeypox was not a "gay disease".

"What we have seen in other countries with monkeypox is that it was predominantly among men who have sexual intercourse with other men, but it is important to note it is not only men who have sex with men, who are vulnerable to monkeypox," she said.

"The media has a huge responsibility in regard to how they frame monkeypox, and it was important that stigmatisation does not ostracise the gay community," she said. And the media must not contribute.

Monkeypox has been reported in African countries such as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and Ghana in the early 2000s. The current outbreak was reported in the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, Portugal and France. Sivro said there was not yet an approved vaccine.

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