

Gatherings in the context of the 2024 mpox outbreak: Public health guidance

Acknowledgment

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Purpose

- The purpose of this document is to provide public health advice to:
- host governments, public health authorities, national or international event organizers, health care providers and all staff involved in the planning and coordination of mass gatherings; and
- people attending gatherings of any size and type.

Background

Mpox is an illness caused by the monkeypox virus (MPXV), of which two distinct clades are recognized: Clade I and II. The disease was initially found only in central and western African countries, but a global outbreak occurred in 2022–2023. In 2024, there is an ongoing upsurge in cases of mpox in central Africa, which has reached additional African countries that are reporting cases for the first time. On 14 August 2024, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) determined that the upsurge of mpox in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and a growing number of countries in Africa constituted a public health emergency of international concern. Information on this outbreak is changing rapidly as we learn more (see the WHO website (1) and weekly updates (2)).

During the global outbreak in 2022–2023, most cases (due to Clade IIb) occurred among gay men, bisexual men and other men who have sex with men who have multiple sexual partners. During the upsurge of cases in 2024 in eastern and central Africa (due to Clade Ib), many cases are in sex workers, heterosexual partners, persons in crowded settings (for example, prisons, camps for internally displaced persons and refugees, and schools), and children. (1,3)

Anyone who has close contact with someone who has symptoms of mpox or contaminated materials may be at risk. In known endemic areas, the virus can also spread from infected animals and contaminated meat.



Mass gatherings (4) are events characterized by the concentration of people at a specific location for a specific purpose over a specific period of time and have the potential to strain the planning and response resources of the country or community regardless of the event's size. The ability to manage these gatherings varies by location, and even smaller events can pose risks depending on the activities involved. These gatherings can be public or private, planned or spontaneous, and may include events like sports, religious, cultural or political activities.

In countries with mpox outbreaks, gatherings, where people may be at risk of mpox, include small gatherings, crowded settings such as camps for refugees or internally displaced persons, prisons, schools, religious facilities or health facilities.

Scope

This document examines the risk-based approach to gatherings, mpox-associated risks during the current public health emergency of international concern, and public health advice for authorities, event organizers and people attending events of any size and type.

Methodology

This document was developed through a review of the available WHO documents and tools related to gatherings. Additionally, the public health advice is derived from and aligns with the existing latest WHO mpox-related guidance. The advice is primarily directed at the main groups involved in gatherings: health authorities, event organizers, and people attending gatherings. The draft emphasizes information from the documents mentioned above that are relevant to gatherings. The document underwent multiple rounds of review by the IMST at WHO, WHO Mass Gathering Collaborating Centres, and other external contributors to ensure that its contents align with WHO publications. The reviewers, evenly geographically distributed, include various entities such as public health authorities and academia.

Risk-based approach for gatherings

WHO recommends that the decisions about holding, modifying, postponing or cancelling gatherings should follow a risk-based approach tailored to the event's local context and characteristics and be reassessed regularly. The approach entails three steps:

- risk evaluation: identification and quantification of the baseline risks, based on the characteristics of the event and the context in which it takes place
- risk mitigation: implementing precautionary measures to reduce those risks
- risk communication: sharing information about the measures taken, the rationale behind them, and advice on protecting health of individuals.

The WHO Mass Gatherings All Hazards Risk Assessment Tool (5) is designed to help conduct of a comprehensive risk assessment for mass gatherings and identify mitigation strategies. For the current public health emergency of international concern, mpox-related risk mitigation and communication measures should be included in the planning for all mass gathering events.

Mpox-associated risks during the current public health emergency of international concern

In the context of mpox outbreaks, the level of risk of transmission at gatherings depends on the increased likelihood of close and prolonged interactions, which can facilitate the spread of MPXV. Additionally, certain gatherings may lead to behaviours such as increased sexual activity, including sex work for livelihood, further raising the risk of transmission. Effective risk mitigation measures may include modification of the event characteristics (for example, venue, duration, facilities, equipment, modalities of interaction among attendees and their requirements for participation, and modalities of interaction between attendees and animals) or public health measures, such as vaccination, risk communication, and diagnostics.



Public health advice for decision-makers (health authorities and event organizers)

The following measures can be considered by health authorities and event organizers for mitigating the risk of mpox transmission associated with gatherings:

Health authorities are invited to consider the following actions.

- Increase country capacity to respond to mpox. It is imperative to strengthen the country's capacity to respond to mpox and minimize the risk of transmission in all settings, whether gatherings take place or not. Major considerations are as follows.
 - » Strengthen public health measures, guided by WHO's strategic framework for enhancing prevention and control of mpox 2024-2027 (6) and a global strategic preparedness and response plan for the period September 2024 to February 2025. (7)
 - » Align entry and travel measures with WHO's recommendations and the International Health Regulations (2005) (3) and avoid unnecessary disruptions to travel and trade. Refrain from implementing temperature screening specific for mpox and require testing or vaccination for entry.
 - » Train clinicians, first responders, staff at points of entry, community-based surveillance staff and others who may provide clinical services during the gathering about mpox signs and symptoms, case definitions, laboratory testing, clinical management, control measures for mpox, and reporting to public health authorities. WHO has published interim guidance on rapid response. (8)
 - » Ensure mpox is included in the national epidemiological surveillance system. WHO has published guidance on surveillance, case investigation, and contact tracing for mpox. (9)
 - » Plan improvement of access to diagnostic services, including genomic sequencing, and strengthen sample collection and transport arrangements for suspected mpox samples.
- » Follow WHO's vaccination recommendations. Vaccination is only advised for those at risk, such as close contacts of mpox cases or high-exposure groups. WHO has published a position paper in this regard. (10)
- » Adequately monitor and address rumours and misinformation about mpox. WHO has published a toolkit on this topic. (11)
- Conduct a gathering-specific risk assessment. Identify events at risk for mpox transmission, based on the event context, epidemiology and attendees' profile, including international travellers from affected areas. Strengthen cross-border collaboration arrangements as needed. Conduct a risk assessment to identify the baseline risk and inform mitigation measures based on the country's capacity and context. WHO has published a tool in this regard. (5)
- Plan and coordinate with event organizers. Keep event organizers informed on the evolution of the outbreak so that they can appropriately implement risk mitigation and communication measures for all attendees and staff. These measures should include locally relevant situational updates and risk mitigation measures that event organizers can put in place, such as establishing an isolation holding area and referral plan in advance (precautionary), altering any high-contact activities and frequent high-touch surface disinfection, to reduce any risks of transmission at the event. They should also include personal protection messages to be relayed to attendees, such as frequent and thorough hand washing. Coordinate with event organizers and implement risk mitigation measures together.

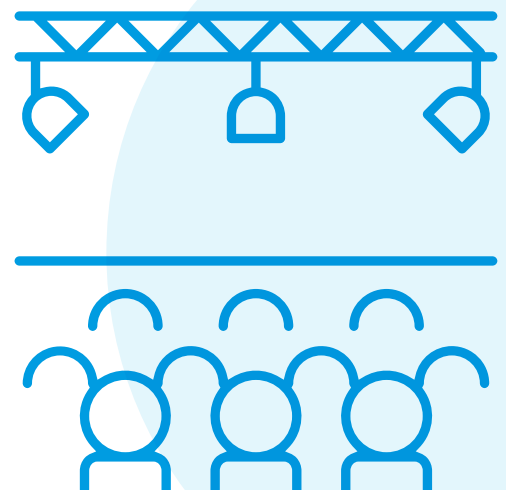


Event organizers are invited to undertake the following actions.

- Plan and coordinate with public health authorities. Ensure clear communication and coordination with relevant health authorities for information sharing, reporting and case management, including isolation if a person with mpox symptoms is identified at the gathering.
- Develop a response protocol. Work with health authorities to create a response protocol for detection, reporting, and managing people suspected of or confirmed as having mpox during the event and ensure that staff are trained to familiarize themselves with the protocol. The protocol should include the following:
 - » recognizing key symptoms (12) (for example, rash, fever, sore throat, headache, muscle aches, back pain, low energy and swollen lymph nodes)
 - » providing on-site care with appropriate infection prevention and control measures, if necessary, and arrangements for medical referrals
 - » reporting people suspected of having mpox to local health authorities
 - » cooperating in case investigation and contact tracing, including making attendance lists available and notifying attendees of potential exposure risks
 - » informing attendees in real-time about potential exposure, and
 - » implementing precautionary measures for staff involved.
- Leverage risk communication and community engagement. Such engagement should be emphasized and adapted throughout the gathering, based on the risk level. Key actions include:
 - » sensitizing stakeholders: ensure that participants, health care providers, venue staff, and the general population, including hotel and restaurant workers, are well-informed and sensitized to potential health-related risks that may be associated with planned gatherings, including mpox (see section on mpox-associated risks during the current public health emergency of international concern above);
 - » identifying platforms for information dissemination: use appropriate channels for communication, such as leaflets, announcements, social media, and local mass media/broadcasts, targeting the most suitable methods for the audience;

- » delivering risk communication messages: crucial information to communicate (12) may include:
 - ◇ signs and symptoms;
 - ◇ modes of transmission;
 - ◇ infection prevention and control measures such as hand wash with water and soap, alcohol-based hand rub, and respiratory etiquette practices;
 - ◇ advice for symptomatic individuals, namely avoid gatherings and close contact, including sexual activity;
 - ◇ guidance for exposed individuals, namely monitor symptoms for 21 days and avoid sexual activity; and
 - ◇ how to access medical care.
- Provide access to hand hygiene. Ensure functional hand washing stations with soap and water are available and appropriately placed around the event location (that is, at entrances, exits, eating areas, toilets and the like) or provide access to alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Implement environmental measures such as surface cleaning.
- Cooperate with contact tracing. Collaborate with health authorities on contact tracing if a person with mpox is linked to the gathering. Prompt interviews should be conducted with affected individuals to identify contacts and places visited. Notify all participants of potential exposure and provide information on mpox, including guidance on seeking medical care.

Both health authorities and event organizers are invited to leverage gatherings as opportunities to inform, engage, and empower attendees for effective mpox readiness and response.



Public health advice for people attending gatherings of any size and type

- Individuals with mpox symptoms, or being considered as people with suspected, probable or confirmed mpox by health authorities should avoid gatherings, seek medical care and follow health authority advice.
 - Attendees should avoid close contact, including sexual contact, with anyone showing mpox symptoms (12) (for example, rash, fever and swollen lymph nodes).
 - If mpox symptoms develop after attending a gathering, people should seek medical care, if possible, notify the health care facility before their arrival and inform health care providers about having attended an event.
 - Those identified as a close contact or potentially exposed to mpox should follow health advice issued by relevant health authorities.
 - People with mpox are advised to refrain from having sexual contact with others and use condoms for 12 weeks after they recover. (1) Practice personal protection measures like hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette.
- Attendees who are at high risk may want to consult health care providers for an understanding of their individual risk and preventive measures to take, including vaccination, before attending the event. Groups at high risk of mpox include: (11)
 - » people travelling to an area or community where a risk of mpox exposure to persons with mpox is considered high;
 - » health and care workers at risk of exposure;
 - » people in the same household or close community as someone who has mpox, including children; and
 - » people who have multiple sex partners, including men who have sex with men and sex workers of any gender and their clients.



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