

AFAO BRIEFING: COMMUNICATION REGARDING SEXUAL CONTACT FOR THE PREVENTION OF MONKEYPOX TRANSMISSION

8 September 2022

Key points

- Ensure messages to gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (GBMSM) are provided by GBMSM as these messages will have more credibility as community members understand how to deliver culturally appropriate messages.
- Partner with LGBTI health/HIV organisations to provide messages on risk reduction to GBMSM.
- Publicly advise GBMSM who wish to reduce their risk to seek further information from their local LGBTI health/HIV organisation.
- Ensure initial messages promote Monkeypox (MPX) awareness, promote vaccination and encourage GBMSM to monitor for symptoms and seek medical assistance if symptoms emerge.
- As we wait for vaccine supplies, options should be provided to support GBMSM to reduce the risk of exposure during sex and support contact tracing in case of exposure.
- Acknowledge multiple options are available to manage and reduce risk and recognise individuals need to be empowered to choose an option that works best for them and their partners.
- Be careful of stigmatising sexual behaviour, particularly as men may not be receptive to messages from the government recommending they reduce sexual partners or abstain from sex when they do not have the virus.

Background

- Cases of monkeypox (MPX) are increasing in Australia. While many cases have been acquired overseas, there are growing numbers of locally acquired transmission.
- Over 98% of cases outside of settings in Africa where MPX is endemic are GBMSM. All cases in Australia are among GBMSM.
- A targeted vaccination program is being implemented, focussing on high-risk individuals, but supply of the vaccine is limited. While health authorities work to improve vaccine supply, risk reduction messages are being provided to GBMSM.
- GBMSM have high levels of sexual health awareness and will want to do the right thing by their health and the health of their communities.
- As demonstrated during the HIV epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic, GBMSM will adapt their sexual behaviour to minimise the risk of disease exposure.
- GBMSM have high levels of sexual health awareness and will seek out biomedical (vaccines) and behavioural avenues to reduce their risk of MPX acquisition. Given the limitations on vaccine supply, behavioural risk

reduction strategies will be options available to GBMSM who want to do everything they can to protect themselves from MPX infection.

Issues for government health officials to consider when providing advice to GBMSM

- Messages on managing the risk of MPXV transmission through sex requires nuanced and sensitive messaging to ensure communications have credibility with GBMSM. Consider what risk reduction messages are provided, who is delivering them, and how they can be delivered in partnership with communities, or led by communities.
- Government health officials are providing health messages to the public through the media. This includes information on transmission routes, MPX symptoms, where to seek support if you may have been exposed to the virus, and the promotion of vaccinations.
- For unvaccinated GBMSM, it is essential to convey a range of steps they can take to reduce the risk of transmission. However, consideration needs to be given to the messages, particularly regarding sexual behaviour change
- With the vaccine rollout expected to be fragmented owing to global supply, consideration needs to be given as to who is best positioned to deliver messages regarding sexual behaviour change.
- The early response to the HIV epidemic demonstrated government health messaging can further stigmatise minority groups and their sexual practices.
- Consistent messages need to be provided by government health officials and LGBTI/HIV community organisations. If different messages are delivered, this will sow confusion, scepticism and distrust and compromise the public health response.

Partnering with AFAO and its members to support the delivery of behaviour change messages

- LGBTIQ and HIV organisations understand how to engage their communities, empower them and provide a range of options to reduce risk.
- Governments should defer to AFAO and its state based members (the AIDS Councils) to convey messages on sexual risk reduction strategies.
- These organisations are highly experienced in delivering health messages to GBMSM and are best positioned to advise GBMSM on how to adapt their sexual behaviour to reduce the risk of MPX transmission.
- Throughout the HIV epidemic, these organisations have proven to be credible, reliable and trustworthy sources of information for GBMSM. Health officials recognised the appropriateness of working with and supporting these organisations to provide HIV prevention messages to GBMSM.
- These organisations understand how to ensure the information on reducing the risk of disease transmission during sex is sensitive, culturally appropriate and takes account of GBMSM's sexual practices.
- When talking to the media, government health officials should advise GBMSM to seek further information on managing and reducing their risk by seeking information from AFAO or the relevant state based organisation.

Promote a variety of options for individuals to manage and reduce the risk of exposure during sex

- Given the history of stigmatising sex between men, even when the intention is to help minimise disease risk, recommending changes to GBMSM sexual behaviour must be handled sensitively.
- One of the lessons from the HIV epidemic is individuals assess and respond to health risks differently. Providing factual non-judgemental information on the options available to reduce transmission risk is essential so individuals are empowered to assess the risk of different approaches and choose an option that works for them and their sexual partners.
- Providing options that enable GBMSM to adapt their sexual behaviour is preferable rather than focussing on a more deficit approach that focuses on what they cannot do.
- Other strategies to reduce risk may resonate better and be more acceptable to GBMSM, such as changing or avoiding specific sexual practices when having sex, creating 'sex bubbles' or strategies to help manage their risk if exposed, such as collecting contact details of their sexual partners. GBMSM used various strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce risk.