

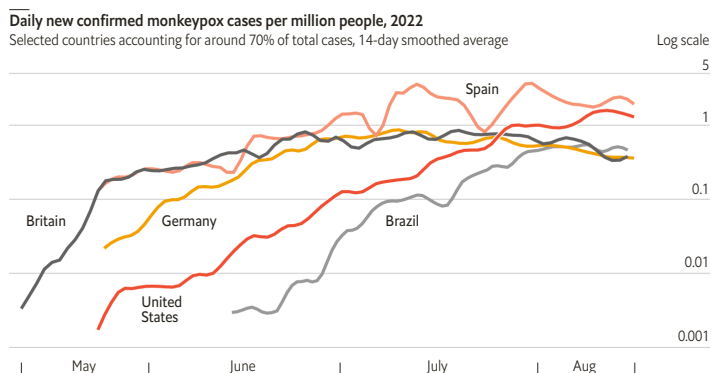
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# Monkeypox has spread rapidly in male sex networks. Will it spread further?

Disease modelling suggests that is unlikely

Aug 18th 2022

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SINCE MONKEYPOX started spreading in Europe in May, over 38,000 cases have been reported around the world. Most of them are in cities in Europe and America, and not necessarily because of more testing for the virus there. Instead, the concentration of cases in those parts of the world is explained by how the virus spreads.

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Although monkeypox infections have occurred in many places—so far, they have shown up in 92 countries—they affect a narrow group of people. Fully 99% of confirmed cases are in men, and among the third of cases for which more detailed information is available, 97% are in men who have sex with men. Those diagnosed tended to engage in high-risk sexual activity. In Britain, about a third of people testing positive reported having ten or more partners in the previous three months.

## → Monkeypox mostly spreads among men who have sex with men

97% of cases worldwide are men who have sex with men

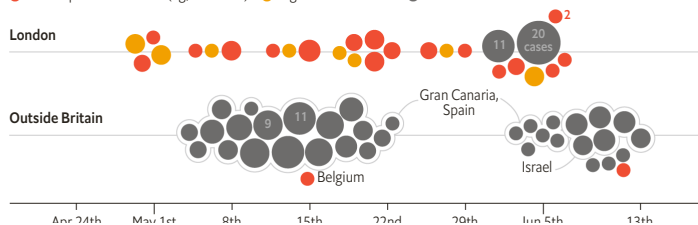
91% of transmissions are through sexual encounters

39% are in people living with HIV

## Events attended by at least two people with monkeypox

Britain, sample of 274 cases

● Sex-on-premises venues (eg, sex clubs) ● Nightclubs and bars ● Festivals

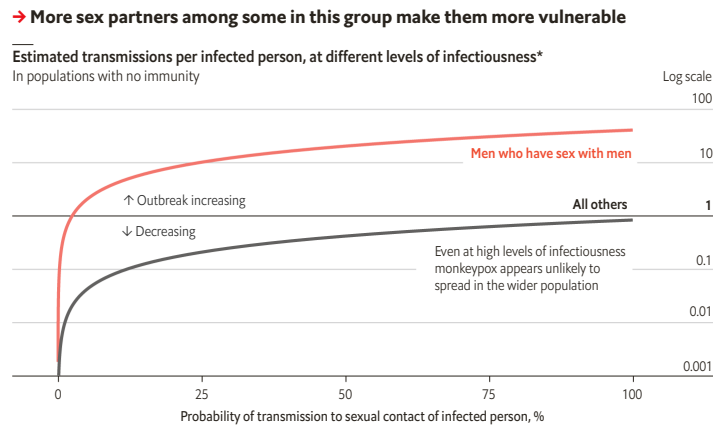


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It is increasingly clear that the disease is almost always transmitted through sex. Where known, 91% of cases are reported to be contracted through sexual encounters. Only on rare occasions has the virus been passed on in other ways from someone to household members, including children. A study of 181 cases in Spain found the virus to be concentrated in lesions in the patients' genital areas, which were common.

After identifying numerous locations where two or more people who later tested positive said they had been at the same time, a group of British epidemiologists found that many were in places where casual sex is common, such as sex clubs, festivals and nightclubs, including some outside Britain. The sum of this evidence suggests that monkeypox is circulating within sex networks of mostly gay and bisexual men, many of whom travel internationally.

Will monkeypox see sustained spread in the general population? One recent paper, which has not yet been published in a peer-reviewed journal, suggests that this is unlikely. Too few adults have the number of sex partners needed to sustain transmission during the few days or weeks when they are contagious. Assuming sexual transmission, outbreaks will thus quickly hit a dead end.



\*Assuming infectious period of two weeks; original study also explored one to four week periods with similar results.

In the countries with the most cases, vaccination of high-risk men is proceeding apace. That, together with efforts to warn those at risk, will hopefully help curb new cases: in Britain, the outbreak is already slowing down. But whether monkeypox will ever disappear remains to be seen. ■

Sources: *Our World in Data*; WHO; UKHSA; "Heavy-tailed sexual contact networks and the epidemiology of monkeypox outbreak in non-endemic regions", by A. Endo et al., 2022

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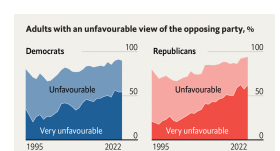
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