

As monkeypox cases rise, health expert says travelers shouldn't worry about casual contact

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As monkeypox spreads, travelers may be concerned about the risk to their health.

But with travel demand high as the coronavirus pandemic eases, Dr. Michael Phillips, chief epidemiologist at NYU Langone Health, said those looking to take a trip should not worry.

World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus declared [monkeypox](#) a global health emergency over the weekend, and more than 18,000 cases have been confirmed around the world, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And while more than 17,800 of those cases are in "countries that have not historically reported monkeypox," according to the CDC, Phillips said the typical traveler need not be concerned.

"This is the time when people want to travel, and I'm sure they're worried about losing their luggage," he said. "They should not be adding monkeypox on to their list of concerns."

What is monkeypox?

According to WHO, people get monkeypox through "close contact" with a person or animal that is infected. Transmission can also occur through contact with contaminated material.

"Monkeypox virus is transmitted from one person to another by close contact with lesions, [body fluids](#), respiratory droplets and contaminated materials such as bedding," the WHO website reads. The disease is not typically seen outside Africa, but cases have recently been found in North America, Europe and more.

In the United States, the Biden administration is ramping up testing and vaccines as case numbers increase, but deaths have been reported only in Africa, where a more dangerous version of the virus is circulating.

Should travelers be worried about monkeypox?

The CDC issued a Level 2 travel health notice in late May warning travelers to "practice enhanced precautions," advising them to take steps like washing their hands often and avoiding touching their face. But the agency said the disease posed a low risk to the general public.

Phillips said the typical tourist or business [traveler](#) should not be concerned.

He said "prolonged close physical contact" is a risk, such as between a family in the same household or through [sexual activity](#), but there is a very low risk of transmission through casual contact. Phillips said he was not aware of any transmission on airplanes.

"We don't worry about airborne transmission," he said. "We don't even worry about sitting next to somebody."

Phillips also noted that most of the monkeypox cases found in places like Western Europe, the U.S. and Canada have occurred among men who have sex with men, and travelers may want to be cautious if they are having [sexual contact](#) with someone overseas. But he stressed the importance of not perpetuating a stigma around the disease, because anyone can be infected.

"Viruses don't know your sexual orientation," he said.

How can travelers protect their health?

Phillips said the risk of exposure while traveling has less to do with where you are going than what you do when you get there. He said protecting yourself is mostly a matter of "risk avoidance," such as not

sharing a bed or having close [physical contact](#) with someone you don't know and "being smart about that kind of thing."

And while patients with lesions can contaminate linens, he said the cleaning and laundry hotels do between guests is sufficient.

More than two years into the coronavirus pandemic, while many travelers may have COVID on the brain, Phillips said monkeypox is different.

"It's not rapidly transmissible like COVID or the flu or other respiratory viruses are, so with good public [health](#) measures, education ... and vaccination, there's good chances that this will be controlled," he said.

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