

In race for monkeypox vaccines, experts see repeat of COVID

July 30 2022, by MARIA CHENG



A sign urges the release of the monkeypox vaccine during a protest in San Francisco, July 18, 2022. The mayor of San Francisco announced a legal state of emergency Thursday, July 28, 2022, over the growing number of monkeypox cases. Public health officials warn that moves by rich countries to buy large quantities of monkeypox vaccine, while declining to share doses with Africa, could leave millions of people unprotected against a more dangerous version of the disease and risk continued spillovers of the virus into humans. Credit: AP Photo/Haven Daley, File

Moves by rich countries to buy large quantities of monkeypox vaccine, while declining to share doses with Africa, could leave millions of people unprotected against a more dangerous version of the disease and risk continued spillovers of the virus into humans, public health officials are warning.

Critics fear a repeat of the catastrophic inequity problems seen during the coronavirus pandemic.

"The mistakes we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic are already being repeated," said Dr. Boghuma Kabisen Titanji, an assistant professor of medicine at Emory University.

While rich countries have ordered millions of vaccines to stop monkeypox within their borders, none have announced plans to share doses with Africa, where a more lethal form of monkeypox is spreading than in the West.

To date, there have been more than 22,000 monkeypox cases reported in nearly 80 countries since May, with about 75 suspected deaths in Africa, mostly in Nigeria and Congo. On Friday, Brazil and Spain reported deaths linked to monkeypox, the first reported outside Africa. [Spain reported a second monkeypox death Saturday.](#)

"The African countries dealing with monkeypox outbreaks for decades have been relegated to a footnote in conversations about the global response," Titanji said.

Scientists say that, unlike campaigns to stop COVID-19, mass vaccinations against monkeypox won't be necessary. They think targeted use of the available doses, along with other measures, could shut down

the expanding epidemics that were recently designated by the World Health Organization as a global health emergency.



A health professional prepares a dose of a Monkeypox vaccine at the Edison municipal vaccination centre in Paris Wednesday July 27, 2022. Public health officials warn that moves by rich countries to buy large quantities of monkeypox vaccine, while declining to share doses with Africa, could leave millions of people unprotected against a more dangerous version of the disease and risk continued spillovers of the virus into humans. Credit: Alain Jocard, Pool via AP, File

Yet while monkeypox is [much harder to spread](#) than COVID-19, experts warn if the disease spills over into general populations—currently in

Europe and North America it is circulating almost exclusively among gay and bisexual men—the need for vaccines could intensify, especially if the virus becomes entrenched in new regions.

On Thursday, the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention called for the continent to be [prioritized for vaccines](#), saying it was again being left behind.

"If we're not safe, the rest of the world is not safe," said Africa CDC's acting director, Ahmed Ogwell.

Although monkeypox has been endemic in parts of Africa for decades, it mostly jumps into people from infected wild animals and has not typically spread very far beyond the continent.

Experts suspect the monkeypox outbreaks in North America and Europe may have originated in Africa long before the disease started spreading via [sex at two raves](#) in Spain and Belgium. Currently, more than 70% of the world's monkeypox cases are in Europe, and 98% are in men who have sex with men.



Daniel Rofin, 41, receives a vaccine against Monkeypox from a health professional in medical center in Barcelona, Spain, Tuesday, July 26, 2022. Public health officials warn that moves by rich countries to buy large quantities of monkeypox vaccine, while declining to share doses with Africa, could leave millions of people unprotected against a more dangerous version of the disease and risk continued spillovers of the virus into humans. Credit: AP Photo/Francisco Seco, File

Catherine Smallwood, a senior emergencies officer at WHO Europe, said the deaths in Spain did not change the agency's assessment of the outbreak.

"Although the disease is self-limiting in most cases, monkeypox can cause severe complications," she said in an email, adding that about 8%

of infections reported had required hospitalization and that monkeypox could sometimes lead to life-threatening complications like encephalitis.

"With the continued spread of monkeypox in Europe, we will expect to see more deaths," Smallwood said.

WHO is developing a [vaccine-sharing mechanism](#) for affected countries, but has released few details about how it might work. The U.N. health agency has made no guarantees about prioritizing poor countries in Africa, saying only that vaccines would be dispensed based on epidemiological need.

Some experts worry the mechanism could duplicate the problems seen with COVAX, created by WHO and partners in 2020 to try to ensure poorer countries would get COVID-19 shots. That missed repeated targets to share vaccines with poorer nations.



Empty vials of vaccines against Monkeypox lie on a table after being used to vaccinate people at a medical center in Barcelona, Spain, Tuesday, July 26, 2022. Public health officials warn that moves by rich countries to buy large quantities of monkeypox vaccine, while declining to share doses with Africa, could leave millions of people unprotected against a more dangerous version of the disease and risk continued spillovers of the virus into humans. Credit: AP Photo/Francisco Seco, File

"Just asking countries to share is not going to be enough," said Sharmila Shetty, a vaccines adviser for Medecins Sans Frontieres. "The longer monkeypox circulates, the greater chances it could get into new animal reservoirs or spread to" the human general population, she said.

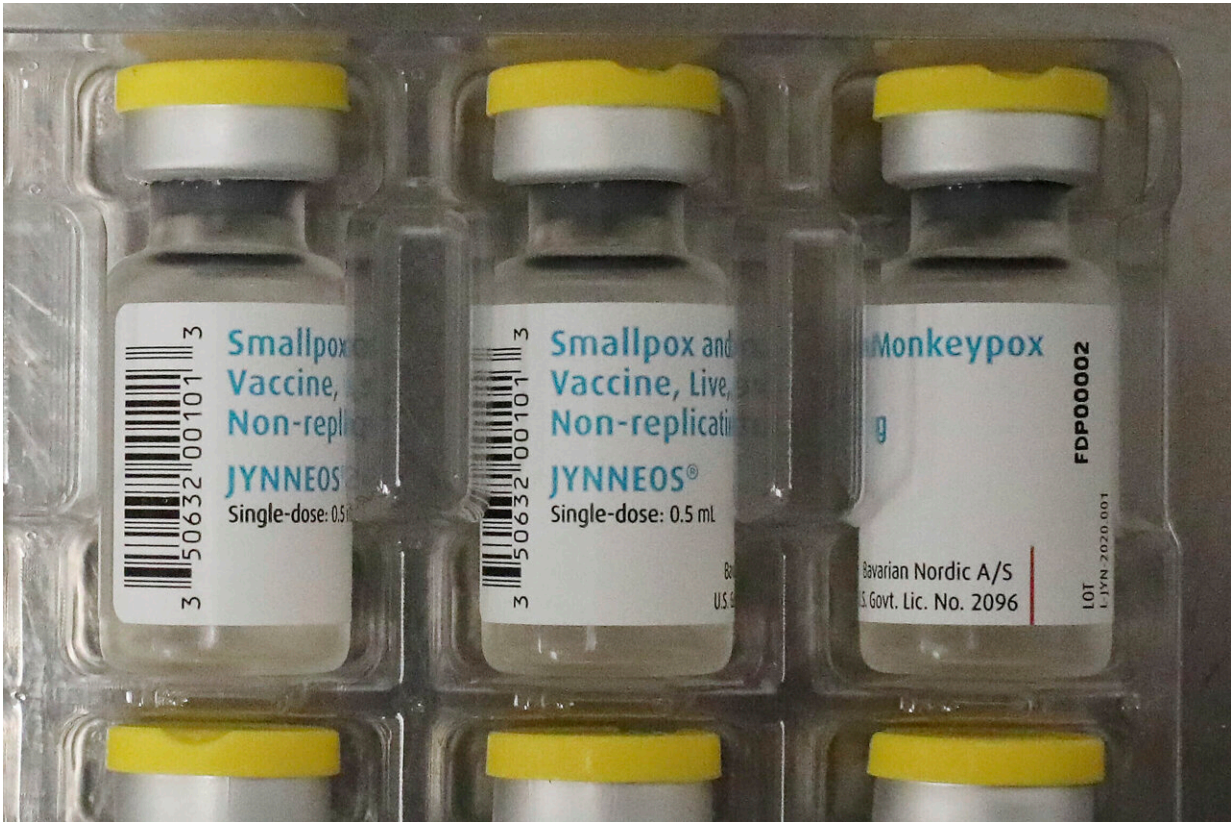
At the moment, there's only one producer of the most advanced

monkeypox vaccine: the Danish company Bavarian Nordic. Its production capacity this year is about 30 million doses, with about 16 million vaccines available now.

In May, Bavarian Nordic asked the U.S. to release more than 215,000 doses it was due to receive "to assist with international requests the company was receiving," and the U.S. complied, according to Bill Hall, a spokesman for the department of Health and Human Services. The U.S. will still receive the doses but at a later date.

The company declined to specify which countries it was allocating doses for.

Hall said the U.S. has not made any other promises to share vaccines. The U.S. has ordered by far the most number of doses, with 13 million reserved, although only about 1.4 million have been delivered.



Vials of single doses of the Jynneos vaccine for monkeypox are seen in the vaccine hub at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital on Friday, July 29, 2022, in San Francisco. Credit: Lea Suzuki/San Francisco Chronicle via AP

Some African officials said it would be wise to stockpile some doses on the continent, especially given the difficulties Western countries were having stopping monkeypox.

"I really didn't think this would spread very far, because monkeypox does not spread like COVID," said Salim Abdool Karim, an infectious diseases epidemiologist at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. "Africa should procure some vaccines in case we need them, but we should prioritize diagnostics and surveillance so we know who to target."

Dr. Ingrid Katz, a global health expert at Harvard University, said the monkeypox epidemics were "potentially manageable" if the limited vaccines were distributed appropriately. She believed it was still possible to prevent monkeypox from turning into a pandemic but "we need to be thoughtful in our prevention strategies and rapid in our response."

In Spain, which has Europe's biggest monkeypox outbreak, the demand for vaccines far exceeds supply.

"There is a real gap between the number of vaccines that we currently have available and the people who could benefit," said Pep Coll, a medical director at a Barcelona health center that was dispensing shots this week.



Jonathan Parducho, a pharmacist, opens a freezer transport box which was delivered earlier containing the Jynneos vaccine for monkeypox, next to a smaller refrigerated transport box containing the Jynneos vaccine to be picked up by an external distributor, in the vaccine hub at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital on Friday, July 29, 2022, in San Francisco. Credit: Lea Suzuki/San Francisco Chronicle via AP

Daniel Rofin, 41, was more than happy to be offered a dose. He said he decided to get vaccinated for the same reasons he was immunized against COVID-19.

"I feel reassured it is a way to stop the spread," he said. "We (gay men) are a group at risk."

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