Van Ameyde McAuslands

What to do if a monkeypox outbreak is suspected on board

A guide for ship operators and seafarers

Whilst the world of shipping continues to face challenges surrounding the presence and effect of Covid-19 there is a new virus circulating that is receiving a lot of media coverage and is causing sufficient concern for the WHO to declare that it constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. That virus is known as monkeypox.

According to IMO: monkeypox is a viral zoonosis (a virus transmitted to humans from animals) with symptoms like those seen in the past in smallpox patients, although it is clinically less severe. Monkeypox virus is transmitted from one person to another by close contact with lesions, body fluids, respiratory droplets and contaminated materials such as bedding.

Whilst the two types of monkeypox originate from West Africa and the Congo Basin it is clear that seafarers living in close proximity of each other on board vessels could be at risk of passing the virus to their shipmates. Cases are now being found globally so it is not just voyages to West Africa that should cause concern as infection could potentially occur anywhere. Furthermore, it is not only transmitted through sexual activity between two males. Any direct contact with bodily fluids or lesions, close 'face to face' contact allow respiratory droplets to pass between each other and even indirect contact through handling contaminated items of bedding or clothing are all considered as transmissible events.

Symptoms

Similar to Covid-19, monkeypox infection is likely to bring on flu-like symptoms – fever, headaches etc. and the incubation period could be up to 21 days. A rash usually appears within 1 to 5 days after the onset of symptoms and this could be on the face, inside the mouth, and on other parts of the body, like hands, feet, chest, genitals or anus. The illness will typically last between 2-4 weeks.

However, sometimes people get the rash first, followed by other symptoms. Others only experience a rash. It is therefore very important for seafarers to be aware of their health and alert others on board if they feel that they are suffering any of these symptoms.

What to do on board

If a crew member is showing any of these symptoms it is very important that procedures are put in place to prevent further spread amongst the crew.

Close contact with a suspected case should be limited as much as possible for up to 21 days with the infected person isolating in a separate room.

Use a separate bathroom or clean thoroughly after use.

Cleaning frequently touched surfaces with soap and water and household disinfectants. Try to avoid sweeping or vacuuming as this might disturb virus particles and cause others to become infected.

Use separate utensils, towels, bedding and electronics.

Lift bedding, clothes and towels carefully without shaking them, put materials into a plastic bag before carrying it to the washing area and then wash with hot water greater than 60°C

Open windows for good ventilation where possible.

Encourage everyone else on board to exercise good hygiene by cleaning their hands regularly with soap and water or alcohol-based sanitizer.

Ensure social-distancing is maintained and that disposable gloves and face masks are worn when in close proximity to an infected person.

Other actions to be taken

Ship operators should advise their P&I Clubs immediately if they suspect they have a case on monkeypox on board one of their vessels. The Club can provide advice and guidance and instruct experts to assist.

Ports around the world will react differently to the presence of monkeypox on board a visiting vessel just as they do with Covid-19. Expert Correspondents will be able to assist with evacuation, safe transport and isolation of infected personnel. Decontamination may be required and safe crew transfers and repatriation. Vaccination and treatment can also be arranged.

Ship operators and seafarers should already be alert to the dangers of infectious diseases, so it is important that they do not let those standards slip and remain vigilant.

Michael Robertson

Head of Crew Welfare at Van Ameyde McAuslands.

Van Ameyde McAuslands are P&I Club Correspondents and have a specialised crew welfare team comprising industry experts and medical clinicians. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic they have assisted many thousands of seafarers and cruise ship passengers with tests and vaccinations. They arrange safe transport of individuals and oversee accommodation at specialised isolation hotels where 24-hour support is provided by their welfare teams. Decontamination of vessels and entire crew changes can be arranged if necessary.

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