

# **An Outbreak of the Monkeypox Pandemic in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**

## **What is Monkeypox and what Risks does it Pose?**

For the past two years, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been facing an epidemic of Monkeypox (Mpox), one of the DRC's priority zoonotic diseases, caused by a virus belonging to the Poxviridae family, genus Orthopoxvirus. Mpox causes fever, rash and lesions all over the body, severe headaches, and fatigue. Some children also develop respiratory problems and have difficulty swallowing, and are at higher risk for secondary bacterial infections. In severe cases, mpox can lead to sepsis, a life-threatening response to infection that requires immediate specialized medical attention.

## **How is Mpox being Transmitted?**

The virus can be transmitted from one sick person (living or deceased) to another through close contact and/or infected body fluids (blood, urine, vomit, sweat, semen, saliva, respiratory droplets, breast milk, etc.) or contamination in the healthcare environment with soiled objects (syringes, needles), as well as via the placenta. Symptoms are characterized by a sudden onset of high fever, followed a few days later by a vesiculopustular rash predominantly on the face and present on the palms and soles of the feet, or the presence of at least 5 variola-like scars.



## **What is the Mpox situation in the DRC?**

Children and families in the eastern DRC are in shock. Their lives have already been blighted by years of conflict, displacement, and some of the highest rates of hunger in the world. The country's health system is already collapsing due the strain of soaring rates of malnutrition, measles, and cholera coupled with the residual impacts of past Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks.

To add a new deadly virus that is aggressively attacking children to the mix is a cruel stroke of fate. As we've seen time and again, it's the already disadvantaged children who are most at risk. Surrounding Goma in eastern DRC are three internally displaced person camps where some 354,000 children are crammed into tents in unsanitary conditions, with limited access to clean water, healthcare, and adequate nutrition. The deadly mpox virus can zip/spread very fast from one tent to another. Young people seem to be particularly affected by the smallpox epidemic due to their less developed immune systems.

In addition, young people can also be easily affected by the overcrowding of a nearby camp for people who were forced to leave their homes because of the conflict in the region. Smallpox is transmitted by very close contact, and the children "always play together". They don't really care about social distance. You can also see in the homes that most children even spend the night together sharing the same bed. You can find three, four, or five children sharing beddings. As a result, the transmission is always present on a daily basis.

The resurgence of Mpox cases in several provinces of the DRC, including Equateur, is a real public health problem. Analysis of Mpox surveillance data showed that in 2024, the DRC reported a total of suspected cases and deaths of Mpox, representing a case-fatality rate of around 4.9%. These cases came from 188 Health Zones in 24 out of the 26 provinces. Equateur province reported 5306 cases, including 294 deaths (a case-fatality rate of around 5.5%). All health zones are affected by this disease.

### **How can we Respond?**

We need to provide support to people who are adversely affected by this pandemic. Hopefully, for most, it will be a short lived, mild infection. But we know for some people it can be very painful and they may require hospital care.

There is a lot of misinformation about monkeypox, and unfortunately, much of it is fueled by a lack of trust in the mpox vaccine. We, as churches, must challenge this. We must work more closely with the affected communities to dispel misinformation.

Still, vaccination will not be a magic bullet: governmental and non-governmental bodies must also urgently address the foundations of the mpox response, which must be adapted to the needs and realities of the people.

### References

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(2023)

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