

Gay and bisexual men prefer news regarding monkeypox to be inclusive

Men who have sex with men's perceptions of, attitudes towards, and suggestions for monkeypox messaging in the media can help guide public health messaging campaigns.

Anybody can be infected with the monkeypox virus. However, men who have sex with men (MSM) have been disproportionately affected by the recent outbreak in the United States. Due to MSM making up the majority of monkeypox cases, they are the current focus of media attention.

A recent study from Texas A&M University's School of Public Health surveyed MSM around the country to investigate how MSM view media content involving monkeypox. It was found that most MSM learned about monkeypox from both state and federal media outlets. Media messaging was perceived to mostly target MSM, with 70% of the study's participants reporting stigmatization of MSM.

MSM tend to want inclusive messaging from the media about monkeypox. Lead researcher Christopher Owens, PhD, an assistant professor in the Department of Health Behavior at Texas A&M University's School of Public Health, found that almost half of the respondents would prefer that the media work to destigmatize gay and bisexual men.

Inclusivity should also be focused on when writing about monkeypox. Viruses do not have the ability to choose who to infect. Therefore, messaging should be tailored towards anybody who is susceptible to be infected—which is everybody.

“It needs to be that balance of messaging, where it's not just one group who is at risk of infectious disease.” Owens said. “It's all groups who are at risk of an infectious disease. So, we need to have messaging that's inclusive of everyone.”

Around one-quarter of the study participants reported wanting media outlets to provide vaccine information. The steps needed to receive the vaccine, where to get the vaccine, and when the vaccine will be available were topics suggested by study participants to include in media messaging. Focusing on monkeypox vaccine messaging could potentially increase the number of vaccinations in both MSM and the public.

Techniques for preventing monkeypox and explanations for how monkeypox spreads were also frequently mentioned topics to include in monkeypox content. Owens and research partner, Randolph Hubach, PhD, the director of the Sexual Health Research Lab at Purdue University, wrote in their article that MSM's opinions on the content of monkeypox media are like their opinions on the Covid-19 vaccine and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a medication used to prevent human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infections.

Stigmatization against members of the LGBTQ+ community exists in both the media and healthcare. Negative experiences involving healthcare professionals and general mistrust in medications due to a lack of LGBTQ+ representation in research have increased hesitancy to receive vaccinations or medications. Regarding both PrEP and the Covid-19 vaccine, research has shown that LGBTQ+ people prefer for the media and government organizations to work to destigmatize their community, as well as provide trustworthy and informative messaging.

Active work is needed to dismantle stigmatization of LGBTQ+ individuals. The inclusion of MSM and others in the LGBTQ+ community when developing monkeypox media campaigns is encouraged by Owens.

“For example, if [campaign designers] want to create a monkeypox campaign, they should really think critically about what images they are using and what messaging they are using. What's the content here? What's the wording that we're using?” said Owens. “So that way we can be inclusive of everyone and not stigmatize a group.”

Creators of media content or public health campaigns could effectively inform disproportionately affected communities while still being inclusive, Owens said, disparities need to be recognized, but it should also be recognized that infectious diseases often have the ability to infect anyone.

This study has been submitted for publication.

Sources

Owens C R & Randolph H. Exploratory study of the monkeypox media consumption, attitudes, and messaging preferences of men who have sex with men in the United States.

Interview - Dr. Christopher Owens. 9/16/2022. chrisowens@tamu.edu

Monkeypox. Center for Disease Control (CDC). Accessed 10/1/2022.

<https://www.cdc.gov/poxvirus/monkeypox/index.html>

Garg, I.; Hanif, H.; Javed, N.; Abbas, R.; Mirza, S.; Javaid, M.A.; Pal, S.; Shekhar, R.; Sheikh, A.B. COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy in the LGBTQ+ Population: A Systematic Review. *Infect. Dis. Rep.* 2021, 13, 872–887. <https://doi.org/10.3390/idr1304007>

Matacotta JJ, Rosales-Perez FJ, Carrillo CM. HIV Preexposure Prophylaxis and Treatment as Prevention - Beliefs and Access Barriers in Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM) and Transgender Women: A Systematic Review. *J Patient Cent Res Rev.* 2020 Jul 27;7(3):265-274. doi: 10.17294/2330-0698.1737. PMID: 32760758; PMCID: PMC7398630.

Peng, P., Su, S., Fairley, C.K. *et al.* A Global Estimate of the Acceptability of Pre-exposure Prophylaxis for HIV Among Men Who have Sex with Men: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *AIDS Behav* **22**, 1063–1074 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-017-1675-z>