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HEALTH BULLETIN: RISK OF MPOX IN RMI LOW, BUT PUBLIC AWARENESS ENCOURAGED

The Ministry of Health and Human Services (MOHHS) in the Republic of the Marshall Islands releases this health bulletin to the general public on the Mpox virus (formally called Monkeypox) for awareness and information sharing.

1. Global Context and Current Outbreak Situation:

- The ongoing Mpox outbreak, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and neighboring regions, has led to over 22,000 suspected cases and more than 1,200 deaths since January 2023. This outbreak is considered one of the most severe, with the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) in August 2024. While cases are falling in all regions of the World Health organization (WHO), the rise in cases in the African region, specifically in the DRC and surrounding countries attributed to a new clade (strain) Ib.
- The Clade I Mpox, which is more severe and associated with higher mortality, predominantly spreads in this outbreak. The virus has also spread to other African countries, including Burundi, Central African Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda.
- In the United States, Mpox cases have significantly decreased since the peak in mid-2022 due to effective vaccination and public health measures. However, sporadic cases continue to be reported, particularly in high-risk populations. For example, Hawai'i reported an additional case in July 2024, totaling 51 cases since June 2022.
- In August 2024, the Philippines reported its first Mpox case of the year, involving a 33-year-old male with no travel history, indicating potential local transmission. This case highlights the continued risk of Mpox even in areas that had not seen recent activity.

- The Philippines also reported a case in December 2023, marking the first detection in that year. The recent case reinforces the need for vigilance across regions, as Mpox remains a significant public health concern.

2. Risk to the Republic of the Marshall Islands:

- The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is currently at a low to moderate risk of Mpox introduction, primarily due to its geographic isolation and limited travel connections. However, vigilance will be maintained, especially given cases in nearby regions such as Hawai'i and the Philippines.
- Health Impact and Vulnerabilities: According to WHO, while most cases of Mpox resolve on their own with supportive care, specific populations, including children, pregnant individuals, and those with compromised immune systems (such as individuals with advanced HIV), are at higher risk for severe disease and complications, including pneumonia, encephalitis, and death. This highlights the importance of rapid detection and response, particularly in vulnerable populations within the RMI.
- Any introduction of Mpox to the RMI could strain healthcare resources, making early detection, isolation, and vaccination critical components of the public health response.

3. Planned Actions by the Ministry of Health and Human Services:

- Enhanced Surveillance:
 - The Ministry of Health and Human Services (MOHHS) will strengthen surveillance at all points of entry, including airports and seaports, using MOHHS Online Screening forms that are expected to be filled out 48 hours before arriving in RMI. Travelers from regions with active Mpox outbreaks will be screened, and information on symptoms and prevention will be provided.
- Public Awareness Campaigns:
 - The MOHHS will conduct public awareness campaigns to educate residents about Mpox. Information on symptoms, transmission methods, and the importance of early detection will be disseminated through local media, social media platforms, and direct community outreach.
- Preparedness and Response Plans:
 - The MOHHS will update preparedness and response plans to include specific protocols for Mpox. These plans will guide healthcare providers in managing suspected cases, including isolation procedures and personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Vaccination and treatment Strategy:
 - Although no Mpox cases have been reported in the RMI, the MOHHS will explore options to secure the JYNNEOS vaccine for high-risk groups as a proactive measure and offer the vaccine

to exposed individuals as a mean of preventing community spread. This strategy will ensure the RMI is prepared to respond swiftly.

- While a majority of cases with mild symptoms will need supportive and skin care (as well as pain management), specific antivirals are being procured to treat cases of severe disease.
- Collaboration with International Partners:
 - The MOHHS will collaborate closely with international health organizations such as WHO and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to stay informed about global Mpox developments and recommendations.

4. Transmission Patterns:

- Mpox will be spread through contact with infected individuals or contaminated materials such as clothing or bedding. Transmission can occur via skin-to-skin contact, respiratory droplets, and bodily fluids.
- In the DRC and other affected areas, transmission has been linked to contact with wild animals, household transmission, and sexual contact, particularly among men who have sex with men (MSM). In the U.S. and other countries, close physical and sexual contact has been identified as the primary transmission route.

5. Prevention and Protection Measures:

- The MOHHS will advise residents and visitors to practice good hygiene, including frequent handwashing and avoiding close contact with individuals exhibiting symptoms of Mpox, such as rashes or sores, to minimize the risk of Mpox.
- Anyone in the RMI who develops symptoms associated with Mpox, such as fever, rash, or swollen lymph nodes, should seek immediate medical attention.

6. Managing Public Gatherings:

- The MOHHS will encourage the safe management of public gatherings. Recommendations will include implementing hygiene measures, monitoring symptoms of persons ill with the said symptoms (seek immediate medical attention), and encouraging individuals who feel unwell to avoid attending events.

7. Public Health Response and Community Engagement:

- Continuous monitoring of the global Mpox situation will be maintained by the MOHHS, with regular updates provided to the public as new information becomes available.

- Community engagement will remain a priority, with efforts focused on educating the public about Mpox, promoting preventive measures, and ensuring accurate information is widely disseminated.

8. Global and Regional Implications:

- While a significant decrease in Mpox cases has been observed in the U.S. and other regions, the situation in Africa, particularly in the DRC, remains serious. Continuous monitoring, vaccination efforts, and public health interventions will be necessary to prevent further outbreaks.
- Vigilance will be maintained in the RMI, particularly with travelers returning from regions experiencing active Mpox outbreaks. The MOHHS will be prepared to implement rapid response measures if cases are detected in the RMI.

9. Call to Action:

- The MOHHS will call upon all residents of the RMI to stay informed about Mpox and adhere to the guidelines provided by health authorities. Vigilance, cooperation, and proactive measures will be essential to maintaining the health and safety of the Marshall Islands.