

Zika Virus

is a mosquito-borne illness that is present in tropical areas. It frequently does not cause any symptoms, or if symptoms occur they are usually mild. It appeared in Brazil in May 2015, probably linked to an outbreak in French Polynesia, and since then has spread to at least 20 countries and territories in the Americas. Due to the widespread presence of the type of mosquito which can transmit Zika, the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) warns it will likely spread to all countries in the Americas except Canada and continental Chile¹.

There now appears to be growing evidence linking the virus to birth defects, and neurological complications. As there is no specific treatment available, and no vaccine to prevent the disease, a number of authorities have advised pregnant women to “consider postponing travel to the areas where Zika virus transmission is ongoing”². Some health authorities have advised women living in Zika outbreak areas to delay falling pregnant.

The situation is rapidly evolving, and information is frequently changing or being updated. An increasing number of travellers are being diagnosed with Zika after returning from affected areas. MedAire and its parent company International SOS are monitoring closely. For the latest updates log in to the MedAire Member Portal at: <https://secure.medaire.com/portal/Login.aspx> and view the medical alerts and country guides.

Transmission

Zika virus is transmitted by the bite of a certain species of mosquitoes (*Aedes*). These are the same mosquitoes which can also transmit dengue and chikungunya viruses. *Aedes* mosquitoes live in urban areas and bite mostly during the day.

Zika virus can be passed from an infected pregnant mother to her baby. There is at least one report of possible spread through sexual contact, and one that may have occurred through a monkey bite.

Symptoms

Most people have no symptoms. If symptoms do occur, they are usually mild – a fever, rash, muscle and joint pains, and red eyes (conjunctivitis), similar to many other viral illnesses including flu, dengue and chikungunya. Abdominal pain and diarrhoea are seen less often. Lymph nodes may become enlarged.

Most people recover fully in about a week.

A rising number of reports of “Guillain–Barré syndrome” (a muscular weakness) associated with Zika infections are appearing from several countries. Brazil has documented an increase in cases of “microcephaly” (a severe birth defect in newborns manifesting as a small head circumference associated with developmental problems), coinciding with outbreaks of Zika. The Brazilian Ministry of Health determined that at least some of these babies tested positive for Zika virus, and many of their mothers recalled or were proven to have infection during pregnancy.

French Polynesia has reported an unexpected rise in the number of babies born with brain malformations, including microcephaly, which may also be linked to Zika infection in the first or second trimester of pregnancy. While there is increasing evidence to support a link between Zika, microcephaly and other birth defects, investigations are ongoing to determine whether Zika infection alone is responsible.

Diagnosis

A specific blood test is used to diagnose Zika virus. Testing is not widely available, and samples may need to be sent to certain reference laboratories. As the disease is similar to, and occurs in areas where there is chikungunya and dengue (other mosquito borne diseases with similar symptoms), testing needs to be performed to confirm the exact diagnosis.

Treatment

No specific treatment is available. Symptoms can be managed with bed rest, fluids and medications to reduce fever. Aspirin and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications (such as ibuprofen and naproxen) should be avoided unless dengue has been excluded (due to the increased risk of bleeding).

Prevention

There is no vaccine against Zika virus. The only way to prevent infection is to prevent mosquito bites.

Risk to Travellers

Zika is present in tropical areas of the Americas, Africa, Southeast Asia and Pacific Islands. See the MedAire country guides for more detail. A number of travellers have been diagnosed with the disease after returning to their home countries. Whilst some of these travellers had visited areas with known outbreaks, others had been to places here the disease is known to be present but no active outbreak was reported.

¹ PAHO Statement on Zika Virus Transmission and Prevention, 24 January 2016 Pan American Health Organisation

² Questions and Answers: Zika virus (Zika) and Pregnancy, United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed 26 January 2016

Zika Outbreak in the Americas

26 January, 2016

Travel Advice

If travelling to an affected area, prevent infection by preventing mosquito bites.

- Use an effective insect repellent that contains DEET, Picaridin, PMD, or IR3535.
- When outdoors, wear clothing that covers most of your body (long sleeves, long pants, socks).
- Ensure windows are covered with fly-wire.
- Consider using an insecticide-treated bed net.
- Use "knock-down" insect spray to kill mosquitoes in your room.
- Choose air conditioned accommodation if possible.

Pregnant women contemplating international travel are advised to consult their doctor for an individual risk assessment and advice prior to any travel, regardless of destination. In addition to the infectious risks of any destination, it is important to consider the standard of available healthcare, and the availability of obstetric and neonatal specialist support (should it be required).

Note that some authorities, including the US CDC, are advising pregnant women (in any trimester) or those who plan to become pregnant to consider postponing travel to any area where Zika virus transmission is ongoing.

After Travel

Monitor your health for two weeks. If you develop symptoms, ensure that you see a doctor and advise them of your travel. Malaria is known to circulate in parts of some countries in the Americas and you may need to be tested and/or treated for malaria.



Prevent infection by preventing mosquito bites.

Further Information

WHO Zika virus information
<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/zika/en/>

CDC Zika virus information
<http://www.cdc.gov/zika/>

Disclaimer

This information has been developed for educational purposes only. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Should you have questions or concerns about any topic described here, please consult your healthcare professional.

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