ZIKA VIRUS

On February 1, 2016 the World Health Organization (WHO) designated the Zika virus a public health emergency of international concern. The primary reason for the decision was that members of an 18-member advisory panel agree that a causal relationship between Zika and with microcephaly is "strongly suspected" although it hasn't been scientifically proven. Being designated as a public health emergency provides for the mobilization of more funding and person power to fight the mosquito-born pathogen spreading rapidly through the Americas.

In January 2016, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a travel alert to highlight countries where Zika virus is prevalent. For information on locations: http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/zika-information

Zika virus is spread to people through mosquito bites. The most common symptoms of Zika virus disease are fever, rash, joint pain, and conjunctivitis (red eyes). The illness is usually mild with symptoms lasting from several days to a week. Severe disease requiring hospitalization is uncommon.

Zika is linked to a specific birth defect called microcephaly. This link is so strong that the CDC issued travel guidance for pregnant women and women trying to become pregnant:

Women who are pregnant (in any trimester):

- Consider postponing travel to any area where Zika virus transmission is ongoing.
- If you must travel to one of these areas, talk to your doctor first and strictly follow steps to prevent mosquito bites during your trip.

Women who are trying to become pregnant:

- Before you travel, talk to your doctor about your plans to become pregnant and the risk of Zika virus infection.
- Strictly follow steps to prevent mosquito bites during your trip.

There is no vaccine to prevent Zika. The best way to prevent diseases spread by mosquitoes is to avoid being bitten. Travelers can limit their exposure to Zika (and other mosquito-borne illnesses like Malaria, Dengue Fever and Chikungunya) by taking precautions to prevent mosquito bites (both during the day and at night). Here’s how:

- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants.
- Stay in places with air conditioning or that use window and door screens to keep mosquitoes outside.
- Use Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)-registered insect repellents. All EPA-registered insect repellents are evaluated for effectiveness.
- Always follow the product label instructions.
- Reapply insect repellent as directed.
- Do not spray repellent on the skin under clothing.
- If you are also using sunscreen, apply sunscreen before applying insect repellent.
- If you have a baby or child:
- Do not use insect repellent on babies younger than 2 months of age.
- Dress your child in clothing that covers arms and legs, or
- Cover crib, stroller, and baby carrier with mosquito netting.
- Do not apply insect repellent onto a child’s hands, eyes, mouth, and cut or irritated skin.
- Adults: Spray insect repellent onto your hands and then apply to a child’s face.
- Treat clothing and gear with permethrin or purchase permethrin-treated items.
- Treated clothing remains protective after multiple washings. See product information to learn how long the protection will last.
- If treating items yourself, follow the product instructions carefully.
- Do NOT use permethrin products directly on skin. They are intended to treat clothing.
- Sleep under a mosquito bed net if you are overseas or outside and are not able to protect yourself from mosquito bites.

If you are concerned about a risk of exposure to Zika related to upcoming travel, contact a specialist in travel medicine, such as Travel Clinic at UNH Health Services. Pregnant women, or women planning to become pregnant, should consult with their Obstetrician/Gynecologist.


*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)*