

# Zika Virus and Pregnancy By Richard Taavon, MD, FACOG



**Z**ika virus disease is caused by the Zika virus carried and transmitted to people by infected Aedes mosquitoes was first identified in

Uganda in 1947. Since 2015, endemic transmission has been occurring in the Western hemisphere. **As of January 2016, transmission of Zika virus had been identified in at least 22 countries or territories in the Americas.** A recent CDC analysis found that travel limited to elevations higher than 6562 feet above sea level posed minima likelihood of mosquito-borne transmission, even within countries reporting active transmission. **To date, there have been no reports of Zika being spread by mosquitoes in the continental United States.** Cases have been reported in travelers to the United States. However, locally-acquired cases have been reported following sexual transmission from male travelers to female non-travelers. With the recent outbreaks in the Americas, the number of Zika cases among travelers visiting or returning to the United States will likely increase.

## Symptoms And Treatment Of Zika

Zika virus symptoms, include mild acute onset of fever, skin rashes, conjunctivitis, muscle and joint pain, malaise, or headache. These symptoms are usually mild; however, it is estimated that only one in five patients will show any symptoms. Severe illness is uncommon. There is currently no vaccine for Zika, and the **best prevention is protection against mosquito bites when in areas where they are prevalent** including using insect repellent, wearing long-sleeve shirts and

pants and avoiding being outside in the daytime (these mosquitoes are aggressive daytime biters). **Treatment of symptoms includes rest, fluids, and use of analgesics.** Fevers should be treated with acetaminophen. Use of Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS) should be avoided. No specific antiviral treatment is available for Zika virus disease.

## Zika In Pregnancy

Although the Zika virus is not harmful to most individuals, it can have serious effects on women who become infected while pregnant because the virus can spread to her fetus. **There have been reports of serious birth defects of the brain including microcephaly in babies of mothers who contracted Zika while pregnant.**

Zika virus has also been found in tissue specimens



from fetal losses. Babies with microcephaly have smaller heads than expected for age and gender, which can result in permanent brain damage. **Zika virus transmission can occur anytime during pregnancy.** Microcephaly may be detected by ultrasonography as early as 18-20 weeks. The CDC highly recommended that pregnant women avoid traveling to any area where Zika is spreading; however, if one must travel to one of these areas, it is important to strictly follow steps to prevent mosquito bites. The CDC also recommends that pregnant women with a history of travel to an area

with Zika virus transmission who report two, or more symptoms consistent with Zika virus disease, should be tested for infection via a blood test. Routine screening of pregnant women who have not traveled to an area with Zika virus is not recommended.

## Zika In Males With Pregnant Partner

Zika virus can be spread by a man to his pregnant partner through sexual contact. The Zika virus can be present in semen longer than in blood. Because of the link between Zika and birth defects, **couples should take steps to prevent infection during pregnancy** if the male lives in or has traveled to an area with active Zika virus transmission.

## Zika And Women Attempting Pregnancy

Women who are currently trying to get pregnant, are advised to speak with their healthcare provider before traveling to areas with Zika. If the man had clinical illness consistent with Zika infection, couples should consider condoms or abstinence for at least six months after onset of illness. If a man has traveled to an active area but has not developed symptoms of Zika disease, preventive measures should be considered for at least eight weeks after departure from the active area.

Since first appearing in the Americas in May 2015, **Zika virus has spread rapidly throughout the region and is likely to continue to spread.** Questions remain, including the frequency of transmission from mother to fetus, the frequency of adverse outcomes in fetal Zika virus infection. The best way to prevent getting Zika virus disease is to avoid travel to any area where Zika virus transmission is ongoing. For more information visit the CDC at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) or the World Health Organization at [www.who.int/en/](http://www.who.int/en/). **WJ**



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