

Zika virus basics and prevention techniques

By Clare Rudolph

Since the mosquito-borne illness known as Zika virus first made headlines in 2015, panic has spread more quickly than the disease itself. Here are some facts about this emerging illness.

What is Zika virus?



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A relative of dengue, yellow fever, and West Nile, the Zika virus first appeared in Uganda in 1947. Most infections cause only a mild illness. However, women infected with the Zika virus while pregnant may have babies with microcephaly, a birth defect involving an abnormally small head and problems with brain development.

How does it spread?

Mosquitoes distribute the disease when they bite an infected person, and then bite another person without the virus. Mothers can also pass it to children during pregnancy and birth. Doctors have now documented cases spread through sexual contact as well.

Who's at risk?

Anyone who travels to affected countries can contract the disease from an infected mosquito. Go **online** for the latest list. Doctors believe sexual transmission can occur before, during, after, and even in the absence of symptoms.

What are the symptoms?

Only about 20 percent of people infected with Zika virus become sick. Those who do typically have mild symptoms, including:

- Fever
- Rash
- Joint or muscle pain
- Headache
- Red eyes

Signs can last from several days to a week. Most people don't feel bad enough to go to the hospital. That means many recover without knowing which virus infected them.

Some evidence also links Zika to a rare neurological condition called Guillain-Barré syndrome. Signs of this illness include weakness in muscles of the arms, legs, and face.

How can I protect my family and myself?

For now, Florida is the only place in the U.S. where Zika has been transmitted by a mosquito. All other cases have been related to travel or were sexually transmitted.

Right now, Zika virus disease has no treatment or vaccine. However, you can still take steps to stay safe. Start by preventing mosquito bites, especially when you travel. Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants, sleep indoors or under a mosquito net, and use insect repellents registered by the Environmental Protection Agency (find details **online**).

Take extra precautions when pregnant. Avoid traveling to areas where Zika is spreading. If your partner has lived in or traveled to an area with Zika, either abstain from sex or use condoms. If you're pregnant and have recently traveled to a Zika-infected country, check in with your doctor, even if you feel fine. Right now, doctors are working hard to understand the link between Zika virus and microcephaly. Your story will help others understand the risks—and what to do about Zika.

Clare Rudolph recently joined the OB-GYN physician team at Barton Women's Health.