

Your Health Matters

ZIKA: A PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY

The World Health Organization has announced a public health emergency. Dr. Margaret Chan, head of WHO, called the possible impact of the Zika virus “an extraordinary event and a public health threat to other parts of the world.” Zika virus has now been reported in many countries around the world, including here in the U.S. A state of emergency is in effect for four Florida counties after nine people were diagnosed with the Zika virus.

Zika is spread from person to person through the bite of infected mosquitoes. One in five people who are bitten by an infected mosquito will get Zika virus. However, most people will only have mild symptoms for up to a week. Many people will not even realize they are infected.

The most common symptoms of Zika are a fever, rash, joint pain and conjunctivitis, which usually begin 2 to 7 days after being bitten. If you believe you have the symptoms of Zika virus and a recent mosquito bite, contact your health care provider.

Zika virus can be found in the blood during the first week a person is infected, and can be passed from one person to another through mosquito bites. Zika can also be transmitted through sexual intercourse, and from a pregnant mother to her baby during pregnancy or around the time of birth. It is not known how often this occurs. There have also been reports of microcephaly and Guillian-Barré syndrome being linked to Zika. This is still under investigation.

To be cautious, women who are pregnant should consider postponing travel to areas where Zika virus is present. Women who must travel to these areas should follow strict steps to avoid mosquito bites. Women who are trying to become pregnant should talk to their health care provider about the risk of Zika infection.

There have been reported cases of Zika in the U.S. now. Since the mosquitoes that spread Zika are found in the U.S., it is possible the virus will spread here. The best way to protect against Zika and other diseases that are spread by mosquitoes is to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes.

- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants tucked into your socks.
- Ensure window screens and door screens are intact to keep mosquitoes outside.
- Sleep under a mosquito net if you are outside.
- Use an insect repellent approved by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and always follow the manufacturer’s instructions.
- Do not use insect repellent on babies younger than 2 months of age. Instead, dress them in clothing that covers arms and legs and cover their stroller or baby carrier with mosquito net.
- Treat clothing and gear with permethrin or purchase permethrin-treated items. Do **NOT** use permethrin products directly on your skin.

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