

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ZIKA

By Alan S. Peterson, MD

Here are some things we do know:

Local transmission--when mosquitoes are infected and spread the disease-it is already a reality in Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, southern Florida and American Samoa. Experts don't anticipate an epidemic on the U.S. mainland, but they do expect local outbreaks, especially in poorer communities and along the Gulf Coast. The scope of those out-breaks will depend on how contagious the disease proves to be, how fast people develop immunity to it, and how swiftly mosquito-control measures are put in place.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advises women of childbearing age to avoid Zika-affected countries, if they can. They should also take several precautions if they must travel there or if they live in an affected area.

Zika can be transmitted sexually, so if you're pregnant, use condoms every time for all forms of sex, or consider abstaining for the duration of the pregnancy. If you're hoping to conceive, wait eight weeks (six months for men) after possible exposure before having unprotected sex.

If you go to a Zika hot spot, use repellent also for at least three weeks after returning to prevent local mosquitoes from picking up the virus from you and passing it on.

Staying away from areas where mosquitoes are circulating is the best way, of course, but that's not always possible. Repellents work well, and despite fears about chemicals, sprays containing DEET 20-30% is among the most effective, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advise. DEET is safe for pregnant women and for children to use.

The Aedes mosquitoes that transmit Zika like to live close to people, and the CDC advise keeping even the smallest containers empty of standing water. Aedes species of mosquitoes don't breed so much in open water as inside homes, in flowerpots, birdbaths, pet dishes, trash and small puddles. And they bite in the daytime, not at night.

What happens if I get Zika?

The most common symptom appears to be a raised rash. People also report fever, muscle aches and red eyes. Some patients report they felt really tired and sore, while others don't remember any symptoms at all.

If you are pregnant or might be, it's important to see a doctor right away and get tested if you think you were exposed. There's no known way to protect a baby whose mother is already infected, but doctors want to keep an eye on the pregnancy. Much of the damage Zika can do to a developing fetus is invisible until after the child is born, but if Zika has caused severe brain damage, it will show up on scans by the third trimester of the pregnancy.