

Zika Q&A

With Julie Varughese, M.D., AmeriCares Medical Officer

AmeriCares



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued an unprecedented travel advisory on Monday urging pregnant women to avoid a Miami neighborhood where local mosquitos have caused 14 Zika infections. Since the current outbreak began in Brazil, the number of countries and territories with confirmed local transmission of the Zika virus has increased to more than 40. Five countries, including the U.S., have also reported Zika cases caused by sexual transmission.

Dr. Varughese brings us up to date on our current understanding of the disease and AmeriCares continued efforts to help underserved populations protect themselves from Zika in the U.S. and internationally.

Q: *What have we learned about the implications of Zika infection since the World Health Organization (WHO) designated the Zika virus and its suspected neurological complications a public health emergency of international concern early this year?*

Dr. Varughese: Our knowledge of Zika and its associated complications continues to evolve. Typical symptoms are generally not severe, but there are some significant neurologic complications that can occur in certain high-risk groups. We now know that Zika can cause microcephaly, a condition where babies are born with underdeveloped brains. Similarly, the WHO has stated that there is growing evidence linking Zika virus infection with Guillain-Barré syndrome, a rare immune disorder that can lead to temporary paralysis.

Q: *What precautions do you recommend for people living in or traveling to Zika hotspots?*

Dr. Varughese: Because Zika is primarily spread through the bite of an infected mosquito, the CDC recommends that people protect themselves against infection by using effective mosquito repellent, pretreating clothing with insecticides and eliminating areas of standing water around the home.

We've also learned that the disease can be sexually transmitted. That's why it's also important to take precautions to prevent sexual transmission of Zika.

The CDC has a lot of great information on its website about how people living in or traveling to Zika-affected areas can [protect themselves](#) and decrease their risk of Zika infection, as well as specific [guidance](#) on preventing sexual transmission.

The CDC also recommends that people returning from a Zika-infected area use insect repellent for three weeks upon return to decrease the chances that they might transmit Zika to local mosquitos—especially if they have an asymptomatic Zika infection.

Q: *Given the advances in our understanding of the disease, are researchers any closer to developing a Zika vaccine?*

Dr. Varughese: There are a number of vaccines being researched and some have shown promise in animal studies. Clinical trials in humans are underway.



A pregnant woman learns about Zika prevention at AmeriCares El Salvador clinic.

Q: *Can you tell me more about the work that AmeriCares is doing?*

Dr. Varughese: AmeriCares is working with our extensive network of partner clinics, hospitals and community organizations in the United States and several countries in the Caribbean and Latin America to respond to the outbreak. Our focus is on education and prevention through community outreach, clinical and community health care worker training, and provision of supplies such as insect repellent and fumigation resources to help decrease the spread of the Zika virus.

In Haiti, Colombia and El Salvador, our efforts have centered on protecting pregnant women. We share information with them about the

health risks of the disease and provide Zika protection kits with items including repellent, bed nets and educational materials.

Our primary care clinic in El Salvador, CIAF (La Clínica Integral de Atención Familiar), has been training health workers and educating communities about ways to protect themselves against Zika. AmeriCares clinic staff have also supported efforts to control the mosquito population, thereby decreasing the risk of infection in the area.

AmeriCares response in the United States, where we have started to see low rates of local transmission, has also focused on Zika prevention. We are donating insect repellent to our U.S. safety net partners as well as other nonprofit health organizations. These prevention efforts include Puerto Rico, which is experiencing high rates of local, mosquito-borne infection.

For the latest on Zika, follow Dr. Varughese on Twitter [@DrJulieAC](#) or go to AmeriCares [website](#).