



**For IR Public Health column
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Zika Virus an Issue in North America, Too

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It would be easy to dismiss the Zika virus as somebody else's problem. After all, the types of mosquitoes that carry it do not call Montana home. Lately, the disease has plagued primarily Central and South America and the Caribbean.

But that's no excuse for complacency. Zika presents some risk no matter where you live. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have confirmed cases in 30 states, including one travel-related case in Montana.

CDC officials recently announced that this virus is "even scarier than we initially thought." So it's worth our while to become informed about the risks so we can do our best to reduce them.

A Public Health Emergency

In case you've managed to avoid the news over the past few months, the World Health Organization declared Zika a public health emergency of international concern on Feb. 1. Before last year, outbreaks of the virus had occurred in parts of Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands. In 2015, the virus leaped to the Western Hemisphere.

So far, direct transmission of Zika virus from mosquitoes to humans has not been documented in the United States. But there have been more than 300 cases among Americans who traveled to areas where Zika has been found.

As the weather heats up and mosquitoes begin breeding – and people begin traveling on summer vacations – we're likely to see more cases of Zika in our nation, and possibly our state.

Pregnancy Complications

Most people infected with Zika virus won't even know they have the disease because they won't have any symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they're usually mild and include fever, rash, joint pain, muscle pain, eye irritation, and headache. They last from several days to a week.

What's so scary about Zika is that, rarely, it can cause severe complications, including autoimmune disorders. Microcephaly is a serious birth defect that's been linked to Zika infections in pregnant women. It's a rare condition in which an infant's head is much smaller than the heads of other children of the same age and sex. Babies with microcephaly often have smaller brains that might not develop properly.

The CDC recommends that pregnant women avoid traveling to any area where Zika virus is spreading. A list of those areas is available at www.cdc.gov/zika/pregnancy/index

The Zika virus also can be spread through sex. So pregnant women whose male sex partners have lived in or traveled to an area with Zika virus should either use condoms or avoid sex during pregnancy.

There have been no reports of infants getting Zika virus through breastfeeding. Because of the many health benefits of breastfeeding, mothers are encouraged to breastfeed even in areas where Zika virus is found.

Preventing Infection

Zika virus is transmitted to people mostly through mosquito bites, but only the *Aedes* species are carriers. Their habitat includes many southern and eastern states but not Montana. Map of the *Aedes*' ranges are available at www.cdc.gov/chikungunya/resources/vector-control

Since other species of mosquitoes spread other diseases, like West Nile virus, it's always a good idea to take precautions against mosquito bites. Certainly if you plan to travel to areas where Zika is active, you should follow these precautions:

- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants.
- Stay in places with air conditioning or that use window and door screens to keep mosquitoes outside.
- Sleep under a mosquito net if you're overseas or outside and not able to protect yourself from mosquito bites.
- Use insect repellants registered by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). When used as directed, these are safe and effective, even for pregnant and breastfeeding women. Always follow the product label instructions. Don't use insect repellents on babies under 2 months old.

There is no vaccine to prevent Zika virus disease.

For more information, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/zika/>