



**MotherToBaby**

Medications & More During Pregnancy & Breastfeeding  
Ask The Experts

**Fact Sheet**

by the **Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS)**

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## **Zika Virus and Pregnancy**

**New information about Zika may become available before it can be included in this fact sheet.**

**Please contact a MotherToBaby Service for additional information that may have become available.**

In every pregnancy a woman starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This is called her background risk. This sheet talks about whether exposure to the Zika virus may increase the risk for birth defects over that background risk. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your health care provider.

### ***What is Zika virus?***

The Zika virus is a mosquito-borne illness, meaning people can get the virus by being bitten by an infected mosquito. Zika virus is related to dengue, yellow fever and West Nile Virus. It was first identified in 1947. In 2013 there were outbreaks of illness from Zika virus in several Pacific islands. More recently, the virus has been reported in many Central and South American countries. Beginning in late 2015, cases of Zika virus were reported in some U.S. states in people who were infected while traveling to these countries.

### ***What are the symptoms of Zika virus?***

The Zika virus commonly causes a mild flu-like illness that might include fever, headache, joint and/or muscle pain, conjunctivitis (“pink eye”) and sometimes a body rash. Symptoms begin 3-7 days after being bitten by an infected mosquito and can last for several days to a week. Not everyone infected with Zika virus will have symptoms. It is estimated that only one out of five infected people will have symptoms.

### ***How is Zika virus treated?***

Treatment is limited to relieving the symptoms of Zika virus: reducing fever, headache, joint pain, pink eye, and any other symptoms that might develop.

### ***Can the Zika virus affect my pregnancy?***

Possibly. An increase in the number of babies born with microcephaly (small head and brain) or other brain abnormalities began to be reported in Brazil in the fall of 2015. Mothers of these babies described rash and flu-like illnesses during their pregnancies and some have tested positive for the Zika virus. Research is continuing in order to learn if the Zika virus is, in fact, a cause of the problems in the affected babies and if there are other factors related to the brain abnormalities in the babies.

### ***Does it matter when in pregnancy someone is infected with Zika virus?***

It is not yet known when in pregnancy a Zika virus infection might be most harmful, or what effects could be related to when in pregnancy a woman becomes infected. Infection earlier in pregnancy is likely to be more harmful than later. It is already known that some types of viruses can be harmful to a pregnancy in the first and second trimesters.

### ***How do people get the Zika virus? How can I protect myself and my pregnancy?***

Zika virus is almost always spread by mosquito bites. Not all mosquitoes carry Zika and not every person bitten by a mosquito will become infected. The type of mosquitoes that can carry Zika virus generally bite in the daytime and indoors. These mosquitos are found in many parts of the world including Mexico, Central America, South America, some areas of the Caribbean and some parts of the U.S. Currently, there are no reports of mosquitoes

carrying the Zika virus in the U.S. Zika virus transmission has been described in a very small number of reports through blood transfusion and sexual contact. There is no vaccine available to prevent Zika virus infection.

Prevention is the best approach for protection. That includes using an EPA approved insect repellent, wearing protective clothing (such as long sleeves and long pants and/or clothing treated with permethrin), and removing standing water where mosquitoes live and breed. When possible, air-conditioning or screens should be used to keep mosquitoes out of the home. More information is available on The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) webpage [Zika Virus Prevention](#). MotherToBaby fact sheets are available for the insect repellent [DEET](#) and information about the insecticide permethrin is included on our [Pesticides and Pregnancy](#) fact sheet.

***Is there a test that can tell if I have or have had the Zika virus?***

At this time, the CDC and some state and territorial health departments are the only laboratories able to detect a current infection. Private laboratories are working on offering the test in the near future. Available tests for detecting past infection may not be able to rule out infection with a virus similar to Zika. Guidelines for testing pregnant women can be found through state health departments.

***What if I test positive for Zika? Can the baby be checked?***

If a pregnant woman has laboratory evidence of Zika virus, the baby's development can be followed closely with ultrasounds for the rest of the pregnancy. Referral to a maternal-fetal medicine or infectious disease specialist with expertise in pregnancy management is recommended.

***Before I got pregnant I was in a country with active Zika. What if I had Zika then, even without symptoms? Is there a chance of a problem for the baby?***

Zika virus usually remains in the blood of an infected person for a few days to a week. The virus will not cause infection in a baby that is conceived after the virus is cleared from the mother's blood. If you conceived very shortly before or after returning from an area with active Zika, you should speak to your health care provider, regardless of symptoms. There is currently no evidence that Zika virus infection increases the chance of birth defects in future pregnancies. Again, the chance of a problem for the baby when the mother has Zika infection in her pregnancy is not well understood.

***Can I breastfeed if I have the Zika virus?***

The Brazilian Ministry of Health and the CDC state that with our current understanding, breastfeeding should not be interrupted. At this time there is no information on possible effects to the baby in a breastfeeding mother who has the Zika virus. Be sure to talk to your health care provider about all your choices for breastfeeding.

***What if the father of the baby is infected with the Zika virus or has been in an area where Zika is active?***

Zika virus can be found in semen and sexual transmission of the virus has been reported. We do not know how often Zika infection can be found in semen or how long the virus can be present in semen.

Consistent and regular condom use is recommended for women if a man has a current diagnosis of Zika infection, a man has symptoms of Zika, or a man has recently been in a place where there is known Zika transmission, even if he has had no symptoms. A man who has returned from an area of active Zika transmission but has not had any symptoms should consider using a condom for 28 days after his return to prevent the chance of sexual transmission to his non-pregnant partner.

***Where can I get more information on the Zika virus?***

Additional information can be found at:

- The CDC: <http://www.cdc.gov/media/dpk/2016/dpk-zika-virus.html>
- The WHO: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/zika/en/>
- PAHO: [http://www.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=11585&Itemid=41688&lang=en](http://www.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11585&Itemid=41688&lang=en)

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