

Zika Virus

Information Sheet

What is it?

Zika is a virus that is spread by mosquito bites. The mosquitoes that can spread Zika virus are not normally found in New Zealand, but they are found in many countries around the world.

The virus can be found in parts of Africa, southern Asia, the Pacific Islands, and the Americas. The virus may also be present, but as yet undetected, in other countries where the vector mosquitoes are present.

How does a person become infected?

Aedes mosquitoes are considered to be the main 'vectors' (agents of transmission) of Zika. These mosquitoes are mostly active during daytime, and it is therefore important that all travellers visiting affected areas take protective measures to prevent mosquito bites throughout the day.

There is very limited scientific evidence to suggest the virus can also be sexually transmitted.

What are the signs and symptoms of the illness?

Most people who get infected with the Zika virus do not show any symptoms. Only around 1 in 5 people who get it will feel sick. The symptoms appear 3–12 days after getting the infection and last for 4-7 days.

Those who do feel sick experience symptoms that may include low-grade fever, joint pain, especially the small joints of your hands and feet, with possible swollen joints, muscle pain, headache, red eyes and rash.

Rare symptoms include digestive problems (abdominal pain, diarrhoea, constipation), small ulcers in the mouth or on the tongue, and itching.

How bad is it?

There are concerns that pregnant women who become infected with Zika virus can transmit the disease to their unborn babies, with potentially serious consequences. Reports from several countries, including Brazil, indicate an increase in severe birth defects in babies whose mothers were infected while pregnant.

There are also concerns that Zika infection can, in rare instances, lead to Guillain-Barré syndrome, a serious immune system disorder.

Treatment

There is no specific treatment for Zika infection. If symptoms develop, these will normally disappear in 4–7 days.

Zika infection may cause a rash that could be confused with other serious diseases such as measles or dengue, so it's important that you check with a health care professional so that they can rule out these diseases.

Use paracetamol for pain and fever if needed. Until your health care professional can rule out dengue, do not take aspirin and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen, as there is a risk of bleeding. Get plenty of rest and fluids, and treat the symptoms that you have. If you are pregnant and develop symptoms within three weeks after travelling to a country where Zika virus has been reported, see your health care provider.

How do I avoid the illness?

There is no vaccine for Zika virus. Because Zika virus is spread by mosquitoes, the best way to prevent infection is to avoid being bitten.

What to do if you're travelling

The Ministry of Health recommends that anyone travelling to an affected area should protect themselves from mosquito bites.

- Use insect repellents and check the label to make sure they contain DEET, picaridin, oil of lemon eucalyptus (OLE), or IR3535. Always use as directed. These repellants are safe for pregnant and nursing women and children older than 2 months when used according to the product label. Oil of lemon eucalyptus products should not be used on children under 3 years of age.
- If you use both sunscreen and insect repellent, apply the sunscreen first and then the repellent.
- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants. You can use insect repellent to treat your clothing, as directed.
- Use clothing and gear (such as boots, pants, socks, and tents) that has been treated with the permethrin.
- Use insecticide spray as directed to get rid of mosquitoes.
- Use bed nets to protect your sleeping area.
- Stay and sleep in screened-in or air-conditioned rooms.
- In tents, use a zip-up screen.

The best way to reduce the possibility of sexual transmission of the virus, or the possibility of becoming pregnant while infected with Zika virus, is to practice safe sex and use condoms.

- **All men** who have travelled to a Zika-affected area and have a pregnant partner should abstain from sexual activity (oral, vaginal, and anal) or use condoms for the duration of the pregnancy, whether they have symptoms or not.
- **All men** who have travelled to a Zika-affected area and have a partner who is at risk of becoming pregnant should abstain from sexual activity (oral, vaginal, and anal) or use condoms, whether they have symptoms or not, for at least six months after leaving a Zika-affected area.

The Ministry of Health also recommends that people who have travelled to an affected country without their partner use appropriate contraception for eight weeks to avoid pregnancy even if they're not experiencing symptoms.

Reports suggest it may be possible for Zika virus to be passed on through blood transfusions from infected donors. The New Zealand Blood Service defers donors who have travelled to countries with mosquito borne viruses.

What to do if you're pregnant, or plan to become pregnant

Pregnant women who become infected with Zika virus can transmit the disease to their unborn babies, with potentially serious consequences. Reports from several countries demonstrate an increase in severe fetal birth defects and poor pregnancy outcomes in babies whose mothers were infected with Zika virus while pregnant. Therefore, the Ministry of Health recommends that women who are pregnant or plan to become pregnant in the near term should defer travel to areas with Zika virus present.

See your health care provider if you are pregnant and develop a fever, rash, joint pain, or red eyes within 3 weeks after travelling to a country where Zika virus infections are occurring. Be sure to tell your provider everywhere you travelled.

If you do travel to an area where Zika virus infections are occurring, and you plan to become pregnant after you travel, you should consider waiting to conceive until 8 weeks after you have left the area.

For further information please contact:



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