

WHY THE ZIKA VIRUS IS CAUSING ALARM

RACING TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE ZIKA

How do people become infected?

Zika is transmitted to people through the bite of infected female mosquitoes, primarily the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, the same type that spreads dengue, chikungunya and yellow fever. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) said *Aedes* mosquitoes are found in all countries in the Americas except Canada and continental Chile, and the virus will likely reach all countries and territories of the region where *Aedes* mosquitoes are found.

How do you treat Zika?

There is no treatment or vaccine for Zika infection. Companies and scientists are racing to develop a safe and effective vaccine for Zika, but the World Health Organization (WHO) had said early in 2016 that it would take at least 18 months to start large-scale clinical trials of potential preventative shots.

A vaccine is not expected to be ready for widespread use for at least two or three years but US government researchers said they started the first clinical trial of a Zika vaccine.

How dangerous is it?

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention concluded that infection with the Zika virus in pregnant women is a cause of the birth defect microcephaly, a condition defined by unusually small heads that can result in developmental problems, and other severe brain abnormalities in babies. The CDC said that since the causal relationship had been established, several important questions must still be answered with studies that could take years.

The WHO in an updated assessment said the "most likely explanation" is that virus infection during pregnancy is a cause of congenital brain abnormalities including microcephaly. In addition, the agency said infection is a trigger of Guillain-Barre syndrome (GBS), a rare neurological disorder that can result in paralysis. The update from the WHO came after considering months of research. Its previous statement, based on a rapid assessment of evidence, said there was strong scientific consensus that Zika virus caused GBS, microcephaly and other neurological disorders.

Brazil recently reported 1,835 confirmed cases of microcephaly. Suspected cases under investigation had declined to 3,257. Current research in Brazil indicates the greatest microcephaly risk is associated with infection during the first trimester of pregnancy, but health officials have warned an impact could be seen in later weeks. Recent studies have shown evidence of Zika in amniotic fluid, placenta and fetal brain tissue.

What are the symptoms of Zika infection?

People infected with Zika may have a mild fever, skin rash, conjunctivitis, muscle and joint pain and fatigue that can last for two to seven days. But as many as 80 percent of people infected never develop symptoms. The symptoms are similar to those of dengue or chikungunya, which are transmitted by the same type of mosquito.

How can Zika be contained?

Efforts to control the spread of the



KUALA LUMPUR: A pest control worker fumigates school grounds on the eve of the annual national Primary School Evaluation Test in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia reported its first locally transmitted Zika case on September 3, a 61-year-old man who has died of heart-related complications, the government said. —AFP

virus focus on eliminating mosquito breeding sites and taking precautions against mosquito bites such as using insect repellent and mosquito nets. US and international health officials have advised pregnant women to avoid travel to Latin American and Caribbean countries, sections of Miami, Florida in the United States and Singapore where they may be exposed to Zika.

How widespread is the outbreak?

Active Zika outbreaks have been reported in at least 58 countries or territories, most of them in the Americas, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Brazil has been the country most affected.

Africa (1): Cape Verde

Americas (48): Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Aruba, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Bonaire, Brazil, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Curaçao, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, French Guiana, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Martinique, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saba, Puerto Rico, Saint Barthelmy, Saint Lucia, Saint Martin, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Eustatius, St. Maarten, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Cacos, United States, US Virgin Islands and Venezuela.

Asia (1): Singapore

Oceania/Pacific Islands (8): American Samoa, Fiji, Kosrae, Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Tonga.

What is the history of the Zika virus?

The Zika virus is found in tropical locales with large mosquito populations. Outbreaks of Zika have been recorded in Africa, the Americas, Southern Asia and the Western Pacific. The virus was first identified in Uganda in 1947 in rhesus monkeys and was first identified in people in 1952 in Uganda and Tanzania, according to the WHO.

Can Zika be transmitted through sexual contact?

The WHO said sexual transmission is "relatively common" and has advised

pregnant women not to travel to areas with ongoing outbreaks of Zika virus. It also advised women living in areas where the virus is being transmitted to delay getting pregnant.

The US CDC is investigating several cases of possible sexual transmission. Those cases involved possible transmission of the virus from men to their sex partners. On July 25, the CDC warned that the virus can be transmitted through unprotected sex with an infected female partner.

A reported case of female-to-male sexual transmission in New York City, and limited human and non-human primate data indicating that Zika virus RNA can be detected in vaginal secretions, led to the new warning, the agency said. CDC's expanded warnings on sexual exposure to Zika cautioned against sex without a condom or other barrier method of protection with any person, male or female, who has traveled to or lives in an area with Zika, including female to female transmission with a pregnant partner.

Recent new Zika research found that the virus may spread sexually from a man to a woman even if the man had no symptoms of Zika infection.

The WHO said that men and women returning from where the Zika virus is actively spreading should practice safer sex or abstinence for six months, regardless of whether they are trying to conceive or showing symptoms. The guidance was a change from the WHO's interim recommendation on June 7, which referred only to men and had a shorter timeframe of at least eight weeks. British health officials reported Zika was found in a man's semen two months after he was infected, suggesting the virus may linger in semen long after infection symptoms fade.

The PAHO said Zika can be transmitted through blood, but this is an infrequent transmission mechanism. There is no evidence Zika can be transmitted to babies through breast milk.

The WHO has identified Zika cases in Argentina, Chile, France, Italy and New Zealand as likely caused by sexual transmission. — Reuters

IVORY COAST RE-OPENS WESTERN BORDERS CLOSED DURING EBOLA EPIDEMIC

ABIDJAN: Ivory Coast has re-opened its western borders with Liberia and Guinea two years after they were closed to prevent the spread of an Ebola epidemic that killed thousands across West Africa, an Ivorian government spokesman said yesterday.

Around 29,000 people contracted the haemorrhagic fever during the more than two-year long outbreak, the worst on record. Over 11,000 died before it finally ended in June, nearly all of them in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. "We had to take these measures to protect our country. And the fact we didn't have a single case must be considered a real success," Bruno Kone said, referring to the border closure measure.

Ivory Coast, French-speaking West Africa's largest economy, shut its borders in August 2014. It came under criticism at the time from some health organizations that argued the closure risked aggravating the epidemic and would worsen hardship in countries already struggling with the economic fallout from Ebola.

Several other regional nations, including Mali and Senegal, also shut their borders temporarily as a precaution. —Reuters

BIDEN ASKS US CONGRESS TO ALLOW UNENCUMBERED ZIKA FUNDING VOTE

WASHINGTON: Vice President Joe Biden on Thursday called on the Republican-led US Congress to allow an up-or-down vote on funding to combat the Zika virus without other provisions attached, calling the health threat posed by the pathogen a national emergency.

Congress has failed to approve any funding to fight the mosquito-borne virus since President Barack Obama asked for \$1.9 billion in February. Lawmakers have been deadlocked for months over a \$1.1 billion funding bill. Democrats have accused Republicans of attaching controversial provisions related to abortion and Obama's healthcare law that they cannot accept and have called for new legislation.

Republicans in turn have accused Democrats of blocking the bill to gain political advantage by portraying Republicans as obstructionists on Zika funding. "Give us an up-or-down vote, straight, on Zika," Biden, a former Democratic senator from Delaware, said at an event on Capitol Hill with fellow Democrats from the Senate and House of Representatives.

"I understand attaching controversial issues to important legislation ... but this is a national emergency," Biden added. "People's health, the well-being of unborn children, the health of the country at large, is at stake. Act."

Republicans and Democrats have huddled separately in closed meetings this week to see if they could reach a compromise during September's 19-day legislative work session. A main issue is Democrats' opposition to language, backed by Republicans, that they say would prevent Zika funds for abortion providers like Planned Parenthood, mainly in Puerto Rico.

US health officials have concluded that Zika infections in pregnant women can cause microcephaly, a birth defect marked by small head size that can lead to severe developmental problems in babies.

There is no vaccine or treatment for Zika. The virus, first detected in Brazil last year, has spread rapidly through the Americas. Florida is the only US state so far where local mosquitoes are known to be transmitting Zika. —Reuters



WASHINGTON: Vice President Joe Biden gestures while speaking at the Center for American Progress' meeting on middle-class economic security, Sept. 8, 2016. —AFP