Zika virus

What is Zika virus? How is it transmitted?

The Zika virus is a virus transmitted through an Aedes mosquito bite. Most commonly, these mosquitoes become infected when they bite an infected individual. The virus is then spread to other people through subsequent bites. A few cases of Zika virus have been transmitted through sexual intercourse, blood transfusion, or from an infected pregnant mother to her baby, but more research is required to fully understand these processes. While outbreaks of Zika virus have mostly occurred in regions of Africa and Asia, a growing number of cases are occurring in parts of South America, Mexico, and the Caribbean.

What are the symptoms associated with Zika virus?

Common symptoms of the Zika virus include a mild fever, rash, muscle and joint pain, conjunctivitis (red eyes), and headache. Symptoms can last from two to seven days. It is estimated that one in five people infected with Zika virus will become ill, and while the exact amount of time elapsed from infection to when symptoms is unclear, it is likely a few days. Symptoms can be relatively mild and infected individuals may not know they have the virus. If you have recently traveled to affected areas or experience any of these symptoms, it is recommended that you speak with a health care provider. A diagnosis can be confirmed through blood tests. There is no evidence that Zika virus causes death; however, the virus can be associated with other medical conditions or complicate pre-existing health concerns.

Who is at risk?

Living in or traveling to an area affected by Zika virus increases your risk of infection, in addition to having sexual contact with an individual who may have recently lived or traveled in an area affected with the virus. As Zika virus may introduce significant complications in pregnancy, it is recommended that women who are pregnant or trying to get pregnant consult a health care provider before traveling to affected regions.

How can I reduce my chances of getting Zika virus?
Currently, there is no vaccine to prevent against Zika virus. The best ways to reduce your risk of transmission are to avoid getting bitten by mosquitoes and avoid traveling to affected areas. Specifically, wearing long-sleeved, light-colored shirts and pants; using insect repellants, window screens, or mosquito netting; and treating clothing or outdoor gear with insecticide may help you avoid being bitten. Additionally, avoiding areas with mosquito breeding grounds like standing water, blocked drains, and accumulated garbage is advised. Due to the potential for sexual transmission (particularly through semen), those who live in or are traveling to an area affected by Zika virus may choose to abstain from sex or use condoms correctly and consistently to prevent the spread of the virus.

Is there any treatment for Zika virus infection?

There is currently no medication to treat Zika virus. If you are infected, it is recommended that you get rest, drink fluids to prevent dehydration, and take over-the-counter medication to treat fever or pain (acetaminophen is recommended; do not take aspirin or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs [NSAIDs]). If symptoms worsen, seek additional medical attention.

What else do I need to know about Zika virus?

Zika virus has been associated with other neurological and autoimmune health concerns. Infants of mothers who were infected by Zika virus during pregnancy are at greater risk for complications, including microcephaly, a serious birth defect that causes babies to be born with an underdeveloped brain and head size. While a direct link between Zika virus and Guillan-Barre syndrome (GBS), has not been established, an increase in GBS has been seen in areas with a Zika outbreak. GBS is an auto-immune disease in which the body’s immune system attacks the peripheral nervous system, causing tingling, muscle weakness, and in rare cases, paralysis.

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