

10 Questions about the Zika Virus, Answered

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The Zika virus is primarily transmitted by the Aedes mosquito. (Photo credit: Anest/Shutterstock)

The Zika virus made headlines earlier this year when the illness was connected to a significant rise in cases of microcephaly, a severe birth defect that affects brain and head development in infants. What is Zika virus? Where did it come from? Here are answers to some of the most frequently asked questions about the disease.

1. What is the Zika virus?

Zika is primarily caused by a virus transmitted by the bite of an *Aedes* mosquito. Recent reports indicate that secondary infections can be transmitted sexually by men. In known cases, the men had Zika symptoms, but the disease can also be spread before, during, and after symptoms are present. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the virus remains present longer in semen than in blood. Research of the sexual transmission of Zika is ongoing and there are many unanswered questions.

2. Where did it come from?

The Zika virus was first identified in Uganda in 1947 in a population of rhesus monkeys. It was first identified in humans in 1952 in Uganda in Tanzania. The virus is known to circulate within Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the South Pacific. Prior to the outbreak in Brazil in 2015, an outbreak of the disease occurred in French Polynesia in 2013.

3. What are symptoms of a Zika infection?

Symptoms include mild fever, skin rash, conjunctivitis (red eyes), and joint pain and tend to last from 2 to 7 days. Symptoms tend to be mild and because the symptoms mimic other illnesses, those infected may not realize that it is Zika. In addition, 80 percent of those infected with the virus exhibit no symptoms. The virus remains in an infected person's blood for about a week. It is believed that once someone has been infected with the virus, they are protected from future infections.

4. How is Zika diagnosed?

A widely-available test for the Zika infection does not currently exist. According to *The New York Times*, because Zika is closely related to dengue and yellow fever, it may cross-react with antibody tests for those viruses. The virus can be diagnosed through PCR virus isolation from blood samples, although this requires sophisticated equipment and is not commonly done.

5. What are known complications of the virus?

Zika came to the forefront of the news earlier this year when cases of a serious birth defect called microcephaly (abnormal head and brain development in infants) escalated in Brazil. Many questions remain about this complication, but it is known that Zika virus can be passed from a pregnant woman to her fetus during pregnancy or at the time of delivery.

Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) is rare complication of the Zika virus and is a disorder in which a person's own immune system damages nerve cells, causing muscle weakness, and sometimes, paralysis. The symptoms of GBS can last a few weeks up to several months. Most people fully recover, but some have permanent damage, and in rare cases, GBS can lead to death.

6. Is it expected to spread?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Zika is expected to spread within the Americas. The species of mosquito that is known to spread the disease is present in all of the region's countries except Canada and continental Chile. On February 1, 2016, the WHO declared the Zika outbreak a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern."

7. How many cases have been reported in the United States?

As of March 9, 2016, there have been 193 cases of travel-related Zika infections in the United States. There have been no local cases of mosquito-borne illnesses in the U.S.

8. Is there a treatment for the virus?

Treatment for an infection is similar to that of the flu: get plenty of rest, drink plenty of fluids to remain hydrated, and take a pain reliever that contains acetaminophen or paracetamol to reduce fever or pain.

9. How can I protect myself from Zika?

If traveling to a region where Zika virus is known, precautions include using a bed net, wearing long-sleeved shirts and pants, treating clothing and gear with Permethrin spray, and using an EPA-approved insect repellent on your skin.

10. Is there a vaccine for Zika?

While there is currently no vaccine for the Zika virus, many research programs are underway to develop one. The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) is accelerating research related to the virus. According to the NIAID, "Although Zika virus is new to the Western Hemisphere, NIAID scientists and grantees have long studied Zika relatives, such as dengue and West Nile Virus. Those studies provide a springboard to accelerate investigations of Zika and may yield good approaches to developing therapeutics and vaccines that will combat Zika virus." Even with accelerated research, given the protocols and testing required to get a vaccine to the public, a viable vaccine is still likely several years in the future.

"It is important to understand that we will not have a widely available, safe, and effective Zika vaccine this year, and probably not even in the next few years," Anthony Fauci, NIAID director, said in a press conference.

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