

## MESSAGE FROM THE STATE HEALTH OFFICER

### Concerns for Zika Increase for Pregnant Women as Virus Continues to Spread

---

August 31, 2016

The increased number of locally acquired Zika infections in Florida, as well as the continuation of warm weather has caused concerns for officials working on the Zika response. Because of the potential risks of Zika virus infection during pregnancy, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) top priority for the Zika response is to protect pregnant women and their unborn babies. Of great concern is the fact that the virus can pass from a pregnant woman to her baby during pregnancy or around the time of birth, and very little knowledge is understood at this time regarding why this happens.

Zika virus infection can cause microcephaly and other severe fetal brain defects. In addition, doctors have found other problems in pregnancies and among fetuses and infants infected with Zika virus before birth, such as miscarriage, stillbirth, absent or poorly developed brain structures, defects of the eye, hearing deficits, and impaired growth. Researchers are collecting data to further understand the extent of the impact of the Zika virus on mothers and their children.

Zika is transmitted by *Aedes* species mosquitoes which are present throughout Alabama and bite during day and night. Current vector control measures have not been effective in some Zika-affected areas such as Miami. As a result, the CDC recommends people make it a habit to wear repellents routinely to prevent mosquito bites and take the following steps to protect themselves and their families from Zika virus:

- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants.
- Stay in places with air conditioning or window and door screens to keep mosquitoes outside.
- Treat your clothing and gear with permethrin or buy pre-treated items.
- Use Environmental Protection Agency-registered insect repellents containing DEET, picaridin, oil of eucalyptus, or IR3535 as directed.
- When used as directed, these insect repellents are proven safe and effective, even for pregnant and breastfeeding women.
- Do not use insect repellents on babies younger than 2 months old.

- Do not use products containing oil of lemon eucalyptus or para-menthane-diol on children younger than 3 years old. Mosquito netting can be used to cover babies younger than 2 months old in carriers, strollers, or cribs to protect them from mosquito bites.
- Sleep under a mosquito bed net if air-conditioned or screened rooms are not available or if sleeping outdoors.

Any pregnant woman who has traveled to a Zika-affected area during pregnancy should be evaluated and tested, regardless of whether or not she has had symptoms. A regularly updated list of countries experiencing Zika outbreaks can be found at <http://www.cdc.gov/zika/geo>. Women whose male sex partners have traveled to an area with Zika need to be concerned about sexual transmission of the Zika virus and the male should use condoms every time or not have sex during the entire pregnancy.

For men and nonpregnant women who have traveled to a Zika-affected area and have been diagnosed with Zika or have symptoms consistent with Zika (fever, rash, joint pain, or red eyes), Public Health advises women to wait at least eight weeks after symptoms first appear before trying to get pregnant and men to wait at least six months after symptoms first occur before trying to get their partner pregnant. The current understanding is that the virus can persist for an extended period of time in semen. That is why there is a longer time frame for the male recommendation. Additionally, new information is now confirming that women can also transmit the Zika virus to their sex partners. Couples should discuss CDC recommendations with their partner and physician or health care provider.

While much about Zika remains unknown, strides are being made in understanding how to recognize, diagnose, and manage the complications of this virus. The Alabama Department of Public Health continues to work with a variety of partners to prepare, protect, and educate Alabamians to meet the challenges of the virus and its risks to the health of our babies. Much is still being learned about Zika. For the latest information and recommendations, visit the Alabama Department of Public Health's website at [www.adph.org/mosquito](http://www.adph.org/mosquito).

Thomas M. Miller, M.D.  
State Health Officer  
Alabama Department of Public Health