

Brazil to fund development of vaccine for Zika virus

January 18 2016



This 2006 photo provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows a female *Aedes aegypti* mosquito in the process of acquiring a blood meal from a human host. On Friday, Jan. 15, 2016, U.S. health officials are telling pregnant women to avoid travel to Latin America and Caribbean countries with outbreaks of a tropical illness linked to birth defects. The Zika virus is spread through mosquito bites from *Aedes aegypti* and causes only a mild illness in most people. But there's been mounting evidence linking the virus to a surge of a rare birth defect in Brazil. (James Gathany/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention via AP)

The Brazilian government announced it will direct funds to a biomedical research center to help develop a vaccine against a virus linked to brain damage in babies.

Health Minister Marcelo Castro said Friday that the goal is for the Sao Paulo-based Butantan Institute to develop "in record time" a vaccine for Zika, which is spread through [mosquito bites](#).

Institute director Jorge Kalil said that is expected take 3 to 5 years.

Brazil is currently experiencing the largest known outbreak of Zika. The virus has been linked to a recent surge in [birth defects](#) including microcephaly, a rare condition in which newborns have smaller than normal heads and their brains do not develop properly.

The Health Ministry says 3,530 babies have been born with microcephaly in the country since October. Fewer than 150 such cases were seen in all of 2014.

Most have been concentrated in Brazil's poor northeast, though cases in Rio de Janeiro and other big cities have also been on the rise, prompting people to stock up on mosquito repellent.

Some women of means have left the country to spend their pregnancies in the United States or Europe to avoid infection.

The Zika virus is spread by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which can also carry dengue and chikungunya.

"Today there is only one way to fight the Zika virus, which is to destroy the mosquito's breeding grounds," Castro said. "The final victory against the virus will only come when we develop a vaccine against that disease."

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued an alert Friday advising pregnant women to avoid traveling to Brazil and several other countries in the Americas where Zika outbreaks have occurred.

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Citation: Brazil to fund development of vaccine for Zika virus (2016, January 18) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-01-brazil-fund-vaccine-zika-virus.html>

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