

Medical student recalls what it was like to have Zika

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Dr. Aileen Marty and Christophe de Lespinasse discuss his bout of Zika.

It started in the middle of a Thanksgiving Day soccer game. Christophe

de Lespinasse felt a sudden splitting headache. "It was really, really strong," he says. "A pulsating headache."

De Lespinasse didn't know it yet, but he had caught Zika, the now infamous virus the World Health Organization recently declared "[a public health emergency](#) of international concern," following an alarming growing cluster of cases of microcephaly in babies born to women who had contracted the virus while pregnant.

The first-year student at the Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine (HWCAM) was visiting family in Haiti last November when he became ill. During his visit, he had volunteered for a surgical mission to the village of Croix des Bouquets, birthplace of rapper Wyclef Jean. Roughly a week later the headache set in, followed by a feeling of weakness, lightheadedness, pain behind the eyes and eye irritation.

"Retro-orbital pain and general malaise are common symptoms of not only Zika, but dengue and Chikungunya, which are also spread by the same mosquito, *Aedes aegypti*," says HWCAM Professor of infectious diseases Dr. Aileen Marty. "So at first, it can be difficult to tell the difference."

But then de Lespinasse developed a rash in the face. "My girlfriend said I had these red spots. I didn't pay attention to it," he says. "And then the next day I looked in the mirror and had them everywhere."



De Lespinasse says rash began around the ears and face.

Dr. Marty says this rash that starts in the face, along with the conjunctivitis or red eye would lead her to start suspecting Zika over dengue and Chikungunya.

A trip to the doctor and a blood test eventually confirmed the 27-year-old did indeed have Zika, but within a week de Lespinasse was none worse for the wear and fully recovered. (*Since de Lespinasse was on a leave of absence from school when this happened, by the time he resumed his studies at FIU in mid-January, the virus had long cleared.)

However, his identical twin brother, Alexandre, who had not travelled to the village where Christophe most likely contracted the virus, also came

down with almost identically similar symptoms a few days later. But unlike Christophe, Alexandre was not actually tested and confirmed to have had Zika.

Fast forward to the beginning of this year; Zika started making headlines news, and de Lespinasse began to see Zika in a different light.

"I thought it was something minor because I had only been sick for a few days, but then I started seeing the cases of microcephaly and I started wondering if it could affect me in another way."

Concerned about possible long-term effects of the virus, he consulted Dr. Marty, an expert in tropical diseases.

"The answer to that question is we've never seen long-term effects in an adult. So even though it shocks your brain and makes it very unhappy while the virus is active, which is why you have that horrendous headache, once you clear it, there's no identifiable damage," Dr. Marty told him.

The other good news is that "once a person has been infected, he or she is likely to be protected from future infections," according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

De Lespinasse is going back to Haiti this Spring to lead a group of classmates on a medical mission trip. Before the go, they plan on meeting with Dr. Marty so she can give them advice on how to prevent mosquito bites and counsel any pregnant patients they encounter.

"When we went on a mission trip last year, only about half the people put on mosquito spray," he says. "This year, we're going to make sure everyone does."

Skipping the mission trip because of the Zika outbreak in the Caribbean is not something he's even considering. First, Haiti is where he grew up, where his family lives. It's home. Second, even a budding doctor understands that physicians must go where they are needed. And third, de Lespinasse has been bitten by another bug: he is fascinated by tropical and neglected diseases. He's pretty sure he wants to become an infectious disease specialist.

Provided by Florida International University

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