

World health officials mobilize on Zika threat

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World health officials mobilized with emergency response plans and funding pleas Tuesday as fears grow that the Zika virus, blamed for a surge in the number of brain-damaged babies, could spread globally and threaten the Summer Olympics.

The World Health Organization, which declared the outbreak an international emergency Monday, said it had created a global Zika response unit to contain the virus and get to the bottom of a corresponding rise in severe birth defects and a potentially crippling [neurological disorder](#).

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescents Societies joined the WHO in calling the outbreak an "emergency," and appealed for 2.4 million Swiss francs (\$2.36 million) to fund the response.

French pharmaceutical giant Sanofi meanwhile announced it had begun research into a vaccine for Zika, for which there is currently no specific treatment.

Developing a vaccine could however take years, experts say.

Zika, which was first identified in Uganda, causes relatively mild flu-like symptoms and a rash. But the apparent link to [birth defects](#) and a potentially paralyzing neurological disorder called Guillain-Barre syndrome is causing worldwide alarm.

In Brazil, which has been hardest hit by the outbreak sweeping Latin America, Olympics organizers said they are concerned but downplayed fears—one day after the government warned pregnant women not to attend the Games.

"We are sure we will win this battle and it will not affect the Games," said Rio 2016 organizing committee spokesman Mario Andrada.

The Olympics will be held in Rio de Janeiro from August 5 to 21, during the southern hemisphere winter, which means there will be fewer of the mosquitoes that transmit the disease, organizers underlined.

WHO expert Anthony Costello emphasized the urgency of rapid action, stressing there was no reason to believe the crisis would remain limited to Latin America, where 25 countries so far have reported Zika cases.

"We are worried that this could also spread back into other areas of the world where the population may not be immune, and we know that the mosquitoes that carry Zika virus... are present through most of Africa, parts of southern Europe and many parts of Asia, particularly south Asia," he said.

Underlining Costello's point, Thai officials announced a man had contracted the virus in the country.

Cape Verde, off the coast of west Africa, and Indonesia have also reported domestic Zika cases.

Free abortion pills

Jitters over the virus have spread far beyond the affected areas to Europe and North America, where dozens of cases have been identified among travelers returning from Latin America.

Costello, an expert in microcephaly—a condition in which babies are born with abnormally small heads and brains—said health officials worldwide needed to adopt a standard definition and measurement of the condition in order to respond to suspicions it is being caused by pregnant mothers catching Zika.

"The development of diagnostic tests is absolutely critical," he said.

"At the moment we believe the association is guilty until proven otherwise."

UNICEF for its part said it was working with governments to get information out to pregnant women on how to protect themselves from mosquito bites—currently the only way to prevent the virus.

A Dutch women's rights group meanwhile offered to send free pills to trigger an abortion to [pregnant women](#) in Latin America, a region known for its restrictive abortion laws.

"We are extremely worried that (the outbreak) might cause increasing unsafe abortions," said Rebecca Gomperts, founder and director of Women on Web.

Latin American countries, particularly Brazil, have reported a surge in babies born with microcephaly since the Zika outbreak was declared in the region last year.

Since October, Brazil has reported some 4,000 suspected cases of microcephaly, of which 270 have been confirmed—up from 147 in 2014.

Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Jamaica and Puerto Rico have all warned women not to get pregnant.

Ecuador said Tuesday it had registered its first pregnant woman infected with Zika, saying her baby was at low risk for microcephaly because she was already near the end of her second trimester.

Zika panic also spread to the auto industry, as Indian carmaker Tata Motors announced it would rebrand its new Zica hatchback—which stood for "zippy car."

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