

Zika fear reignites Brazil's abortion debate

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The Zika virus scare is reopening debate over abortion in Brazil, where some are asking the painful question: is it right to risk having a baby with microcephaly?

In the country with the world's biggest Catholic population, abortion is permitted in few circumstances—until 2012 only after rape or when the mother's life is in danger.

But fear over the mosquito-transmitted Zika virus—believed to cause [microcephaly](#) where the head is abnormally small—could spark change.

A group of pro-abortion activists, lawyers and doctors is launching a legal battle in the Supreme Court to allow abortion in cases of microcephaly and when mothers-to-be have contracted Zika. The same group successfully sued in 2012 to have a category added to the abortion law for cases of anencephaly, where the embryo is missing a major part of its brain and skull.

Doctor Artur Timerman, head of the Brazilian Dengue Society, told AFP that some women with Zika are not waiting and are already seeking clandestine abortions.

Illegal abortion

Timerman said at least two woman have come to him with Zika symptoms, which are less serious than those for the dengue virus and are almost always harmless for anyone but pregnant women.

"One of them was in her sixth week of gestation, the other in the eighth week. I confirmed the diagnosis," he said, adding that he learned afterward that both women had gone to terminate the pregnancies.

Brazil has seen 404 babies born with microcephaly and another 3,670 suspected cases since last October, making the country the epicenter of what the World Health Organization calls an international emergency. In 2014, Brazil had registered just 147 cases of microcephaly.

"My role is technical: to inform people of the risks," Timerman said. "However, we need more resources to know the real extent of the problem."

Legal battles

Thomaz Gollop, a doctor who is part of the group petitioning the Supreme Court, says women should wait to become pregnant "until we have a better understanding of what's happening."

But [abortion laws](#) need to be loosened, he said. About a million such operations are believed to be carried out unofficially every year.

"How can we oblige a woman to have a seriously handicapped child in a situation that is totally out of her control? It's inhuman," Gollop said.

Part of the argument is that the Zika virus can currently only be detected within seven days of the start of symptoms—if there are any. A majority of infected people have no symptoms at all.

In addition, microcephaly is only detectable in the fetus after 24 weeks.

That means that a pregnant woman could easily have Zika without knowing and this, argue the activists, boosts the case for allowing

preventative abortions in the early stages of pregnancy.

Generation microcephaly?

Gollop warns of a "generation of children with microcephaly. It's a tragedy."

But abortion is a taboo subject in Brazil and many back tight restrictions.

Jesseir Coelho, a judge in the city of Goiania, argues that the law could only be loosened to allow abortion for fetuses that cannot survive birth.

"I understand that if the Supreme Court allowed abortion for cases of fetuses born without brains, then they can authorize abortion for cases of microcephaly if it is clear that the fetus will be born dead," he said.

Anti-[abortion](#) groups say that trying to make such choices leads to doctors playing god.

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