

USOC forms infectious disease panel to address Zika concerns

March 4 2016, by Eddie Pells

An infectious disease specialist from the University of Utah will chair a group formed by the U.S. Olympic Committee to address concerns about the Zika virus and other health issues at the Rio de Janeiro Games this summer.

Carrie Byington will head the group that will establish best practices for those in the U.S. Olympic delegation traveling to Brazil. The mosquito-borne virus is an epidemic in Central and Latin America; the World Health Organization has declared it a global health emergency.

Zika causes mild illness or no symptoms in most people but is believed to be linked to a birth defect that causes babies to be born with unusually small heads.

The USOC panel will develop educational material and be available to offer updates and create plans for athletes who become ill.

Also on the panel are Randy Taplitz of University of California-San Diego and Capt. Martin S. Cetron from the Centers for Disease Control.

"The health and safety of our athletes, and our entire delegation, is our top priority," said USOC CEO Scott Blackmun.

But the USOC came under scrutiny earlier this year when some U.S. athletes questioned whether they might travel to Brazil for the Olympics.

Most notably, U.S. soccer player Hope Solo said if the Olympics were being held now, she wouldn't go.

The USOC responded by sending a letter to members of its delegation emphasizing the federation's concern about the virus. It publicized a page on its website—USOC.org/RioTravelUpdates—where it would post the most recent news on Zika and other health-related concerns.

The CDC's most recent advice, issued last week, was for pregnant women to consider not going and for their male sexual partners to use condoms after the trip or abstain from sex during the pregnancy.

The CDC also recommends that all travelers use insect repellent while in outbreak areas and continue to use it for three weeks after travel in case they might be infected but not sick.

The Olympics will be held Aug. 5-21, which is winter in Brazil, and mosquitoes aren't expected to be as abundant.

Still, America sends the largest delegation—one filled with stars, some of whom have already voiced their opinions.

Earlier this week, Michael Phelps told The Associated Press that he'll travel to Brazil, along with his fiancée and their newborn son.

"We're not worried about it," Phelps said. "I think if you go into any Olympics, there's always something that comes up."

The International Olympic Committee has distributed guidance to all the Olympic teams. The USOC is monitoring that advice, and making members of the new panel available to its athletes.

"Our in-house medical team are some of the best in the world at what

they do, but having access to, and relying upon, the kind of outside expertise represented by this advisory group is just another way we can make sure our athletes and staff have what they need to be well and compete at a high level," said the USOC's managing director of sports medicine, Bill Moreau.

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