

# Canadian professor: Olympics should be postponed due to Zika

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In this Tuesday, Jan. 26, 2016 file photo, a health workers stands in the Sambadrome spraying insecticide to combat the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito that transmits the Zika virus in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The Sambadrome will be used for the Archery competition during the 2016 summer games. With the opening ceremony less than three months away, a Canadian professor has called for the Rio Olympics to be postponed or moved because of the Zika outbreak, warning the influx of visitors to Brazil will result in the avoidable birth of malformed babies. The IOC and World Health Organization disagree, saying Zika will not derail the games. (AP Photo/Leo Correa, File)

With the opening ceremony in Rio de Janeiro less than three months away, a Canadian professor has called for the Olympics to be postponed or moved because of the Zika outbreak, warning the influx of visitors to Brazil will result in the avoidable birth of malformed babies.

"But for the games, would anyone recommend sending an extra half a million visitors into Brazil right now?" University of Ottawa professor Amir Attaran, who specializes in public health, said in an article published this week in the Harvard Public Health Review.

Brazil is by far the country most affected by Zika, a mosquito-borne virus which has now been scientifically proven to cause a range of disturbing birth defects, including babies born with abnormally small heads and neurological problems.

In February, the World Health Organization declared the epidemic to be a global health emergency. The WHO says there are no restrictions on travel or trade with countries affected by Zika outbreaks but advises pregnant women not to travel to those regions.

Attaran's position is not shared by Olympic and global health authorities, who insist the Aug. 5-21 games will not be derailed by the virus.

The International Olympic Committee, which follows the WHO's advice, said it has no plans to relocate or postpone the games.

"The clear statements from WHO that there should be no restrictions on travel and trade means there is no justification for canceling or delaying or postponing or moving the Rio Games," Dr. Richard Budgett, the IOC's medical director, told The Associated Press. "The IOC will continue to monitor the situation very closely and work with the WHO, and we're confident as we've been advised by the experts that the situation will improve over the next three months."

The Olympics are expected to draw about 500,000 visitors from abroad, a prospect that Attaran fears could spark new outbreaks elsewhere in the world and result in an increase in the number of brain-damaged babies born to infected pregnant women that might otherwise not have traveled to Brazil. He doesn't want the games to be canceled, but argues they should be delayed or moved.

"If the IOC and the World Health Organization do not have the generosity of heart to delay the games to prevent children being born and disabled their whole lives, then they're among the cruelest institutions in the world," Attaran, an outspoken critic of WHO, said in a telephone interview with the AP.



This is a Saturday, Feb. 13, 2016 file photo of an army soldier distributing a pamphlet about the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito that spreads the Zika virus, on the

edge of the Copacabana beach, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Part of the beach will be used for the beach volleyball competition during the 2016 summer games. With the opening ceremony less than three months away, a Canadian professor has called for the Rio Olympics to be postponed or moved because of the Zika outbreak, warning the influx of visitors to Brazil will result in the avoidable birth of malformed babies. The IOC and World Health Organization disagree, saying Zika will not derail the games. (AP Photo/Leo Correa, File)

"What I'm asking for is a bit of delayed gratification so that babies aren't born permanently disabled."

The Zika outbreak is just one of the challenges facing Brazil in the buildup to South America's first Olympics. Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff is facing impeachment, the economy is in deep recession and the country is gripped by a vast corruption scandal centered on state-controlled oil giant Petrobras.

Attaran is not the first public health official to call for the games to be postponed because of the Zika risk; New York-based academics Arthur Caplan and Lee Igel wrote in an article in Forbes in February that hosting the Olympics at a site teeming with the virus is "quite simply, irresponsible."

The IOC and Brazilian organizers say the Zika threat will be mitigated because the games are taking place in the South American winter, reducing the mosquito population. But not everyone is convinced the Zika threat will subside entirely by August.

"This is a wake-up call for authorities to look at the situation more closely," said Jimmy Whitworth, a professor of international public health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, referring to Attaran's article.

He was not linked to Attaran's paper and acknowledged it might be difficult to change any Olympic plans at this late stage.

Whitworth said it was WHO's responsibility to make the health risks clear, even if that means issuing what could be very unpopular advice that could affect the Olympics.

"WHO isn't there to be popular, so they need to put that aside and consider the [public health](#) perspective," he said.

WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier said it was important for every traveler who goes to the Rio Games to take precautions against mosquitoes and that [pregnant women](#) should speak with their doctors.



This is a Tuesday, Jan. 26, 2016 file photo of health workers as they get ready to spray insecticide to combat the *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes that transmits the Zika virus under the bleachers of the Sambadrome in Rio de Janeiro, which will be



used for the Archery competition in the 2016 summer games. With the opening ceremony less than three months away, a Canadian professor has called for the Rio Olympics to be postponed or moved because of the Zika outbreak, warning the influx of visitors to Brazil will result in the avoidable birth of malformed babies. The IOC and World Health Organization disagree, saying Zika will not derail the games. (AP Photo/Leo Correa, File)

World soccer's governing body seems to take Attaran's warnings seriously. Michel D'Hooghe, chairman of the FIFA medical committee, described the Canadian's paper as "an alarming message" and said he would ask FIFA's medical office for an evaluation and report to the ruling FIFA Council. The Olympic soccer tournament will be played in venues across Brazil, including areas where Zika is more prevalent than Rio.

U.S. women's team goalkeeper Hope Solo said in February that she would not go to the Rio Olympics if she had to choose then, citing worries about Zika. In an interview Tuesday with CNBC, Solo said she would go "begrudgingly."

"I'm going to take every precaution necessary," she said. "I'm not sure I'm even going to be leaving the hotel room, outside of practice."

The medical director of Australia's Olympic team said there was "no chance" the games would be moved. Dr. David Hughes said in a statement Wednesday that the Zika risk to Australian athletes was "minimal," although he noted only the link to a condition that sometimes causes Guillain-Barre syndrome, a potentially fatal condition that also causes temporary paralysis. He made no mention of the proof the virus causes the birth of permanently brain-damaged babies.

"The last couple of people that I have spoken to, who have been to Rio in the past month or two, haven't seen a mosquito," Hughes said. "I believe we can proceed with confidence, knowing that we have appropriate guidelines and preventative measures in place."

Dr. Isaac Bogoch, an infectious diseases specialist at the University of Toronto who has studied the anticipated path of the virus, said it is "very likely" the Olympics could speed up the spread of Zika around the world.

Still, Bogoch said that since most people traveling to Rio wouldn't be affected by Zika, it would be an overreaction to move or postpone the games.

"The spread of Zika to other countries is already happening," he said. "Canceling the Olympics is not going to prevent that."

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