

CDC urges speed on Zika as House moves to negotiate funding

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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Thomas Frieden speaks at the National Press Club in Washington, Thursday, May 26, 2016, on the latest research and forecasts on the Zika virus. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

The U.S. must act more quickly to protect pregnant women from birth defect-causing Zika, a top health official said Thursday even as the House left town for its Memorial Day recess with no visible progress toward a congressional compromise on emergency funding to battle the

virus.

"In a [public health emergency](#), speed is critical. A day, a week, a month can make all of the difference," Dr. Tom Frieden, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told the National Press Club.

It has been three months since the Obama administration requested \$1.9 billion for Zika, and Thursday the GOP-controlled House moved to officially begin talks with the Senate on how much of that request to grant.

Funding aside, Frieden said there's no reason to cancel or delay the Olympics in hard-hit Brazil.

The risk to athletes and delegations attending the Olympics "is not zero," he said in response to a question. But, "the risk is not particularly high other than for [pregnant women](#)."

Zika can cause severe birth defects including brain damage, and the CDC for months has been telling pregnant women not to travel anywhere that it is spreading—whether it's for the Olympics or any other reason.

What about worry that other Olympics attendees might bring the virus home? With 40 million U.S. travelers to Latin America and the Caribbean each year anyway, Olympics visitors will make up too tiny of a fraction to make a difference, Frieden said.



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In Congress, the Senate has approved a measure that combines \$1.1 billion to fight Zika with broader spending bills for transportation, housing and veterans. The House has approved \$622 million but cuts other spending to defray its costs. Republican leaders have struggled with how to deal with Obama's request. Thursday's House vote was to begin a conference committee with the Senate to settle the difference.

"At the end of the day, the amount of resources that are necessary will be made available, The only difference here is one side wants to pay for it and not add to the national debt," said Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla. "It is also shameless to exploit a crisis for political gain."

Cole said the administration hasn't been hamstrung in any way so far in the Zika battle. But Democrats say it's affecting the ability of U.S. health officials to control mosquitoes over the long term, study how Zika is harming fetuses and how to protect them, and to purchase diagnostic tests to tell who's been infected with a virus that can cause harm even if the pregnant woman noticed no symptoms.

Democrats are fighting for the full \$1.9 billion request.

"Anything less will severely damage our ability to respond to this virus, and endanger Americans across the country," said House Minority leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., who calls the GOP bills a "reckless and frankly indefensible effort to shortchange the fight against this deeply frightening Zika virus."

In fact, the \$1.1 billion Senate measure and the Obama request are fairly similar when it comes to how much money to spend on Zika; the main difference is that the administration wants back the almost \$600 million it diverted last month from the Ebola battle and other accounts.

Frieden said he desperately needs to recoup the money the CDC had to borrow for Zika. That includes \$44 million in emergency preparedness grants that states use for crises ranging from flu to hurricanes, plus funds intended to tamp down Ebola flare-ups in West Africa and help developing countries spot other brewing outbreaks before they spread.

"We can't be letting down our guard in one place to fight another battle," Frieden said.

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