

# WHO warns pregnant women about Zika ahead of Rio Olympics

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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)

The World Health Organization is warning pregnant women not to travel to areas with Zika, and advising other travelers to take precautions against the mosquitoes that spread the virus ahead of the Rio de Janeiro Olympics.

In a statement issued on Thursday, the U.N. health agency restated the advice it has been giving for months, but tied it to the upcoming games to emphasize the importance of taking personal preventive measures.

WHO also said that since Zika can also be spread sexually, pregnant women should abstain from sex or practice safe sex with anyone who has recently returned from areas with outbreaks. Zika has now been proven to cause a range of severe birth defects, including brain-damaged babies born with abnormally small heads and a rare neurological disorder that is sometimes fatal and can cause temporary paralysis.

Earlier this week, a Canadian professor called for the Olympics to be postponed or moved because of the epidemic, arguing that holding the Rio Games would result in the avoidable birth of malformed babies, as well as potentially sparking new outbreaks worldwide.

"WHO has a moral and scientific duty to prevent these games from going ahead as scheduled," said Amir Attaran, a public health specialist at the University of Ottawa. He questioned the utility of WHO's advice, which also recommends that visitors to Rio "avoid visiting impoverished and overcrowded areas."

"That's half of Rio," Attaran said. "They might as well just tell people not to go."

Other experts welcomed the statement.

"It's good to see that WHO has broken its silence on this question," said

Suerie Moon, a research director at Harvard University's School of Public Health. She said the recommendations would carry more weight had WHO convened its independent group of experts to consider the issue of whether the Olympics should be moved or postponed.

WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier said it was possible the agency might hold a meeting of its Zika experts in the coming weeks, but such a gathering would probably not specifically address the Olympics.

"I doubt that very much," he said. Lindmeier said WHO's advice might evolve if there is new information to consider.

WHO said that because the Olympics will take place during Brazil's winter, there would be fewer mosquitoes and the risk of being bitten would be lower.

Attaran pointed out that cases of dengue—spread by the same mosquitoes that spread Zika—have jumped six-fold this year despite Brazil's aggressive efforts to wipe out the insects, adding there is no evidence Zika transmission will disappear by the time the games start in August.

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