

# Going to the Olympics? Some health risks to consider

August 1 2016, by Mike Stobbe

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This June 28, 1999, file photo shows a smashed Ford sits upended on Avenida Atlantica along the Copacabana beach Monday, June 28, 1999 in Rio de Janeiro. Zika is in the spotlight but health experts say the most likely cause of death or serious harm to travelers everywhere is injuries from car accident, falls, crime or other mishaps. (AP Photo/Geraldo Perez, File)

Traveling to the Olympics? Don't let illnesses meddle with your fun.

Roughly half a million people from around the world are expected to

travel to the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. And while Zika is in the spotlight, there are other bugs and health problems that Olympic athletes and spectators should keep in mind.

What's the biggest threat? Health experts say the most likely cause of death or serious harm to travelers everywhere is injuries from car accident, falls, crime or other mishaps.

But that's not what's on the minds of people headed to the Olympics, said Dr. Nicholas Van Sickels, associate director of Tulane University's travel medicine clinic in New Orleans.

"Zika is what brings them in the door," Van Sickels said of recent clinic visitors.

A look at those [health problems](#), and what athletes and travelers can do about them.

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## HOW BIG A THREAT IS ZIKA?

The risk of getting sick from Zika is low, especially compared to other illnesses that a visitor to Rio might suffer. It's winter in Brazil; a time when mosquitoes that spread the virus are at a low ebb. But for mothers-to-be, the stakes are very high because an infection during pregnancy can cause serious birth defects. That's why pregnant women have been told to stay away.

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## BUT HOW CAN I AVOID ZIKA?

The virus is mainly spread by tropical mosquitoes, though it also can be transmitted through sex. Travelers can protect themselves from mosquito bites by, among other things, wearing long sleeves and long pants and using insect repellents. Also, stay in places with air conditioning or that use window and door screens, the CDC suggests.

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## WILL I KNOW IF I'M INFECTED?

You might not. Most infected people do not get sick, and those that do usually experience only mild symptoms, like fever, rash, red eyes, [joint pain](#), that ends within a week. But some infected adults have developed a paralyzing condition called Guillain-Barre syndrome.



This Thursday, Nov. 12, 2015 file photo shows a single dosage syringe of the Fluorix quadrivalent influenza virus vaccine in New York. Zika is in the spotlight

but there are other bugs and health problems that Olympic athletes and fans should keep in mind, including the flu. (AP Photo/Patrick Sison, File)

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## WHAT ABOUT OTHER TROPICAL ILLNESSES?

The same mosquito spreads other tropical illnesses, including chikungunya, which has been spreading in Brazil and other parts of South America in the last few years. It has some of the same symptoms as Zika, but the joint pain is often debilitating and can give people a stooped appearance—the name chikungunya comes from a word meaning "to become contorted." Like Zika, there is no vaccine or cure for it. There are vaccines or medicines for other mosquito-borne diseases seen in Brazil, including yellow fever, dengue fever and malaria. Those aren't considered much of a threat for Olympic visitors, though.

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## WHAT ELSE COULD MAKE ME SICK?

If a traveler to the Olympics gets sick, it's most likely from drinking water or eating undercooked or unclean food, said Dr. Martin Cetron of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Food should be peeled, boiled or cooked. Avoid food from street vendors, and fruits and vegetables that have not been thoroughly washed, experts suggest. Drink bottled water or beverages. And maybe pack some medicine for diarrhea, Cetron said. Some swimming areas in Rio are contaminated with sewage, and the CDC advises avoiding swallowing mouthfuls of water and staying away from beaches with warning signs.

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## ANYTHING ELSE?

It's flu season in the Southern Hemisphere, so expect that people in Rio may be sneezing or coughing and spreading flu germs. Flu and other respiratory illnesses are probably the second most common thing travelers to the Olympics will get, Cetron said. Wash your hands and drink lots of uncontaminated fluids, experts say.

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## WHAT IF I GET SICK IN BRAZIL?

Eu me sinto doente. That's Portuguese for "I feel sick." Talk to a doctor or nurse if you feel very ill, especially if you have a fever, the CDC advised. The CDC website has information about finding medical care while abroad and also offers some health terms in Portuguese. Officials do not expect a lot of Olympic travelers to take Zika home with them. Researchers at Yale University recently estimated that there may be no more than 40 travelers going home from the Olympics with infections.

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Online:

CDC: [olympics-rio](#) target="\_blank">wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/a ...  
er-[olympics-rio](#)

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