

# 'Zika can break out anywhere,' warns Brazilian doctor

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The Brazilian doctor who first linked the Zika virus to brain damage in babies warns that rich countries are not safe from the disease, urging them to increase research funding.

Obstetrician Adriana Melo was the first person to make the connection between an outbreak of Zika in Brazil and a surge in babies born with microcephaly, or abnormally small heads.

Melo, who works at the heart of the outbreak in the northeast Brazilian city of Campina Grande, sent her first sample of amniotic fluid in for Zika tests on November 10, 2015.

The positive result—the first of many for mothers whose babies had the debilitating neurological condition—sparked a chain reaction of alarm.

It culminated in February, when the World Health Organization declared an international public health emergency over the link between Zika and microcephaly.

Melo said the world has not done enough since then to understand and fight this "neglected" disease.

She urged wealthy countries to wake up to recent findings that Zika, which is typically spread by tropical mosquitoes, can also be transmitted sexually, and possibly through other bodily fluids.

"We know there are other transmission vectors and that (Zika) can break out anywhere, in any country," she told AFP in an interview in Rio de Janeiro, on the sidelines of an international conference on the disease.

"It's a disease that doesn't interest rich countries much because they think it won't reach them. But it's a risk to underestimate this virus. I am very afraid of viruses," she said.

Melo called for more clinical studies of Zika, which has been linked not only to microcephaly in babies but also a potentially deadly neurological disorder called Guillain-Barre syndrome in adults.

There is currently no treatment or vaccine for the virus, whose mild, flu-like symptoms belie its potentially devastating side effects.

## **'Here to stay'**

Brazil has been the country hit hardest by Zika, with 1.5 million people infected and more than 2,000 babies born with [brain damage](#).

The disease, which originated in Africa, has swept Latin America and the Caribbean since it was first detected in Brazil last year.

"Traveler's Zika"—cases brought back by people who spent time in affected countries—also reached Europe and the United States.

Then, last July, US health authorities announced that locally transmitted Zika cases had been detected in Florida.

Meanwhile, warnings were emerging that tropical mosquitoes were not the only vector for the disease.

In February 2016, the United States reported a case of sexual

transmission in Texas. Dozens more followed.

Recent research indicates the virus could also be spread through tears or sweat.

Melo warned health authorities not to take their eyes off the epidemic, even though the number of cases has diminished as mosquito populations have declined during the southern hemisphere winter.

"We need to use this moment of calm, after the explosion of 2015, to push ahead with research on the virus," she said.

"The current reduction in cases doesn't mean the virus isn't there. We still know very little about it... We don't know if the [virus](#) can reactivate or mutate, like dengue fever, which now has four sub-types," she said.

"We need to better study this disease, which is here to stay."

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