As temperatures heat up, here's what you need to know about Zika virus

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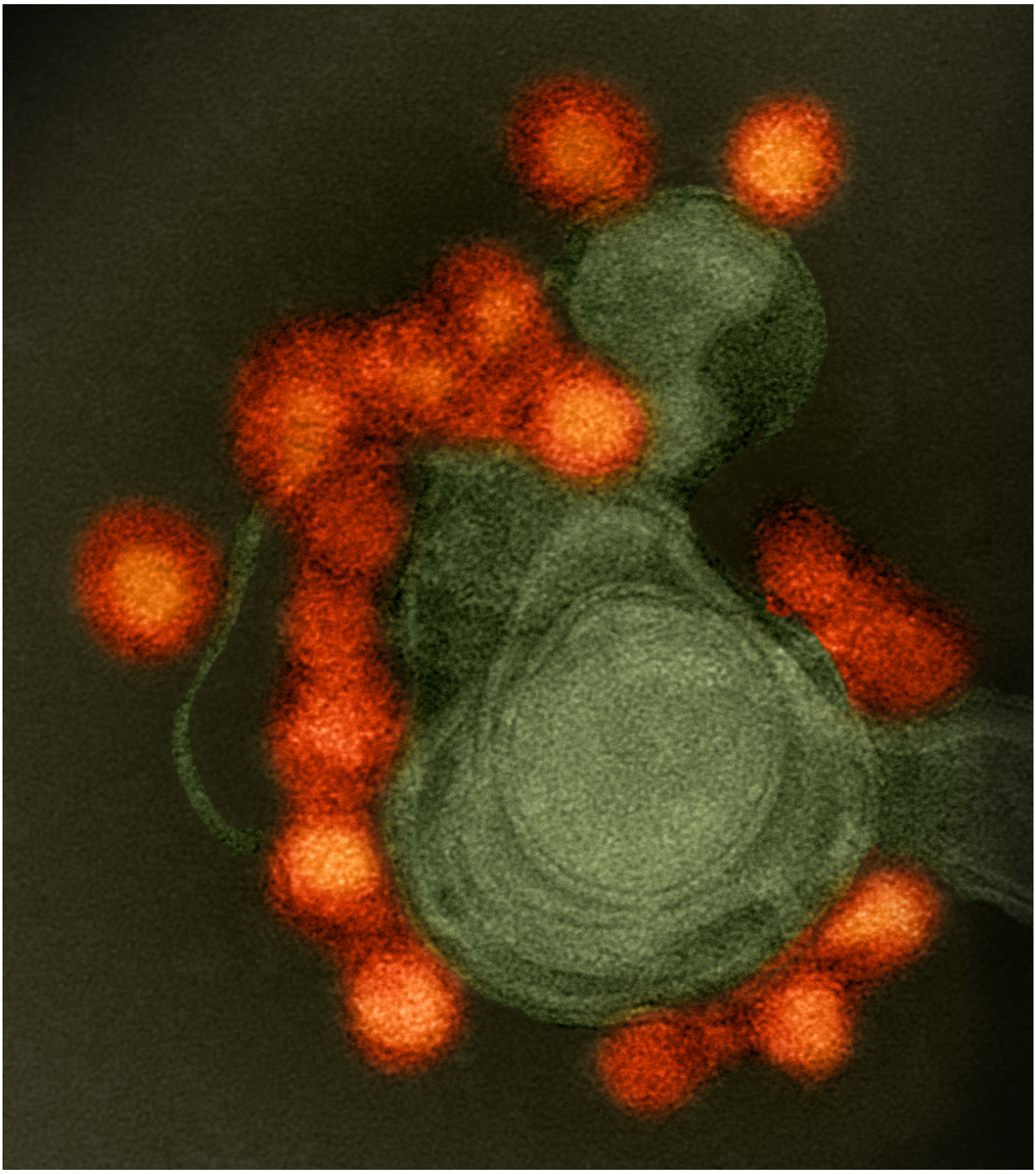

Transmission electron microscope image of negative-stained, Fortaleza-strain Zika virus (red), isolated from a microcephaly case in Brazil. The virus is associated with cellular membranes in the center. Credit: NIAID

Spring has sprung and in many parts of the country, so have the mosquitoes. In light of the current Zika epidemic, experts at the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine tell you what you need to be aware of this mosquito season.

Zika virus is most commonly transmitted by Aedes mosquitoes and also can be transmitted sexually. It can cause fever, rash, joint pain and conjunctivitis. One of the major concerns is the link between the virus and neurological illnesses – babies born to mothers infected with Zika virus have been to be at an increased risk of congenital birth defects, including a condition called microcephaly in which the baby's head is smaller than expected, often due to abnormal brain development.

"There are serious concerns about the possibility of Zika virus infection returning to Texas during the summer months," said Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine and Texas Children's Hospital Endowed Chair in Tropical Pediatrics. "One important reason is that Zika virus transmission occurred in Brownsville and possibly elsewhere in South Texas during the 2016-2017 winter. In addition, it has been an unusually warm and mild winter and early spring. Together, these factors raise the concern that the Aedes aegypti mosquito numbers could be high in Texas urban areas such as Houston, Corpus Christi, Galveston and San Antonio."

Outside of Texas, South Florida also is a high-risk area due to transmission of the virus there in 2016, Hotez noted. Other areas of concern are the Gulf Coast states between Texas and Florida, including Louisiana, Mississippi, George and Alabama, where Aedes aegypti mosquitoes are in abundance, in addition to areas around Tucson, Ariz., and select pockets in Southern California.

"Overwhelmingly, the major concern should be for women of reproductive age living in these areas who are pregnant or might be

pregnant. Women living in these areas should have a conversation with their obstetrician about the best protective measures for this spring and summer. In addition, we do not know yet the impact of Zika virus on the nervous system of infants and young children, so parents may also want to speak with their pediatricians about their concerns," Hotez said.

Because there has been evidence of sexual transmission of the virus, women who are concerned about their pregnancy status should have a discussion with their obstetricians about mosquito protection measures.

Currently, there is no vaccine available for Zika virus, so the best way to prevent becoming infected is by avoiding mosquito bites. This can be done by reducing exposure through maximizing time indoors, wearing appropriate mosquito repellant products such as DEET products and wearing clothes that minimize skin exposure.

If you think you have Zika, it's important to seek medical care and Zika virus diagnostic testing. Be sure to notify your primary care provider and, if you are pregnant, your obstetrician.

For those traveling this spring and summer, be sure to consult the CDC's resources on at-risk travel areas (zika/geo/index.html" target="_blank">www.cdc.gov/zika/geo/index.html). If you have travel concerns, especially if you are pregnant or might be pregnant, or if your spouse is traveling to an affected area, consult a travel physician and your obstetrician.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine