

# What to know about the tropical Zika virus in Latin America

March 18 2016, by Mike Stobbe

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In this Jan. 18, 2016 file photo, a researcher holds a container of female *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes at the Biomedical Sciences Institute at Sao Paulo University in Brazil. The Zika virus is mainly transmitted through bites from the same kind of mosquitoes that can spread other tropical diseases, like dengue fever, chikungunya and yellow fever. (AP Photo/Andre Penner, File)

A rare tropical disease has become epidemic in Latin America and the Caribbean. The mosquito-borne Zika virus usually causes a mild illness

but is now suspected in an unusual birth defect and other health issues. Some things to know:

## WHAT IS ZIKA?

The Zika (ZEE'-ka) virus was first discovered in monkeys in Uganda in 1947; its name comes from the Zika forest where it was first discovered. It showed up in Brazil last year and has since been seen in many Latin American countries and Caribbean islands.

## HOW IS IT SPREAD?

It is mainly transmitted through bites from the same kind of [mosquitoes](#) that can spread other tropical diseases, like [dengue fever](#), chikungunya and yellow fever. But investigators are also finding cases that have been passed on through sex.

## ARE THERE SYMPTOMS?

Experts think most people infected with Zika virus don't get sick. And those that do usually develop mild symptoms—fever, rash, joint pain, and red eyes—which usually last no more than a week. There is no specific medicine and there hasn't been a vaccine developed for it, which is the case for some other tropical illnesses that cause periodic outbreaks.

## WHY IS IT A CONCERN NOW?

There's been mounting evidence linking Zika infection in [pregnant women](#) to a rare [birth defect](#) called microcephaly, in which a newborn's head is smaller than normal and the brain may not have developed properly. Officials also are investigating a Zika-related increase in reports of a nerve condition called Guillain-Barre (gee-YAHN'-buh-

RAY) that can cause paralysis.

## CAN THE SPREAD BE STOPPED?

Individuals can protect themselves from mosquito bites by using insect repellents, and wearing long sleeves and long pants. Eliminating breeding spots and controlling mosquito populations can help prevent the spread of the virus.

## HAVE THERE BEEN CASES IN THE U.S.?

Yes. This week, health officials said nearly 260 lab-confirmed Zika infections have been reported in the 50 states in the last year—a count that includes 18 pregnant women. Almost all of them were travelers, but six caught it from sex with recent travelers. But officials blame mosquito transmission for nearly all of the 283 cases reported in Puerto Rico and two other U.S. territories. The kind of mosquito that spreads Zika is found on the southern United States, so experts think it's likely the pests will spread the virus there, too.

**More information:** CDC Zika page: [www.cdc.gov/zika/](http://www.cdc.gov/zika/)

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