

RiskTopics

Zika Virus Outbreak: Tips to Help Protect Workers

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This Risktopic provides background on the Zika virus outbreak and business considerations for this type of event.

Introduction

The rapid spread of the Zika virus in the Americas has raised concerns among public health officials due to its link to two potentially serious health effects. Most individuals infected with the virus will experience only mild symptoms, if they note any symptoms at all. About twenty percent of those infected will note symptoms that typically consist of an acute onset of fever, maculopapular (light bumpy) rash, pain/stiffness in the joints, headaches, or conjunctivitis (pink eye).¹ Symptoms usually appear 2 – 7 days after exposure. Severe disease requiring hospitalization is uncommon and fatalities are rare. Of greater concern is the fact that the Zika virus has been identified in tissues from infants with microcephaly (small head size and brain defects) and from fetal losses in women infected during pregnancy. Also, there have been cases of Guillain-Barre syndrome reported in patients following suspected Zika virus infections. With this potential for more serious consequences and the rapid rise in Zika infections recently, the World Health Organization (WHO), U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the health department of at least one US State and other public health agencies have issued alerts related to the Zika virus.

This Risktopic provides background on the current Zika outbreak and provides guidance for businesses in managing the Zika threat. As with any emerging disease outbreak, the information on Zika is changing and current references should be monitored periodically for up to date information. A list of useful references is included at the end of this document. Zurich does not express any opinion in this Risktopic regarding the liability of any person relative to the Zika outbreak, or the availability of insurance coverage.

Discussion

The Zika virus is a member of the *Flaviviridae* virus family which includes dengue, West Nile, and yellow fever viruses. It is transmitted to humans primarily through the bite of an infected *Aedes aegypti* species mosquito, the same mosquitoes that spread chikungunya and dengue fever. The Zika virus was originally noted 1947

¹ "Symptoms, Diagnosis, & Treatment." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 03 Feb. 2016. Web. 19 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.cdc.gov/zika/symptoms/index.html>>.

among monkeys in Uganda and human cases were first noted in 1954. Prior to 2015, periodic Zika virus outbreaks have occurred in areas of Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands. In May 2015, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) issued an alert regarding the first confirmed Zika virus infections in Brazil. The *Aedes aegypti* mosquito has spread widely in the Americas over the past few years and has been noted in the southern U.S. While no cases of mosquito transmission has been noted in the U.S. as yet, it has been widely transmitted in Central and South America and select Caribbean Islands. In addition, cases of Zika virus have been noted in the U.S. among individuals who had recently traveled to other areas of the Americas. Table 1 in the appendix lists the current countries known to have Zika circulating at the time of the writing of this Risktopic.

While mosquitos are the primary source of transmission, there have been instances where the virus is believed to have been transmitted via perinatal, in utero, possible sexual and transfusion events associated with infected individuals. At least one incident of sexual transmission of Zika virus has been suspected in the U.S. Research is continuing about potential for transmission through other body fluids.

The *Aedes aegypti* species mosquito is a daytime biter as well as from dusk to dawn so individuals need to institute preventative measures throughout the day. Most other mosquito varieties feed only from dusk to dawn. The mosquitos typically breed in domestic or natural water-holding containers such as tree holes, old tires or other discarded containers and feed both indoors and outdoors near dwellings. Even small containers may be breeding grounds. No vaccine or preventive drug is available. Supportive treatment for persons with symptoms of Zika virus is indicated and includes rest, plenty of fluids and using acetaminophen for fever or pain. The use of aspirin or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory agents such as ibuprofen should be avoided until a diagnosis of Zika is confirmed. Both the WHO and the CDC are beginning efforts to develop a vaccine, but realistically, it will be several years before one is available.

The best way to help prevent Zika virus infection is to avoid mosquito bites by wearing light colored clothing including long sleeves and pants to minimize exposed skin and to use insect repellents when outdoors. Repellents, including DEET, may be used in accordance with their labeling. Also, the use of permethrin treated clothing and gear (such as boots, pants, socks, and tents) may also be effective. Choose indoor areas with screens, air conditioning, or use mosquito nets, particularly for sleeping.

The CDC issued a travel advisory in January 2016 urging travelers to the affected areas to take special precautions to minimize mosquito bites. It also suggests that women who may be pregnant check with their physician and consider delaying travel to the outbreak areas. Travelers to the outbreak areas should take extra precautions to minimize the chance of mosquito bites as noted above and monitor their health for symptoms. If symptoms compatible with dengue, chikungunya or Zika virus disease (noted earlier) develop within three weeks after returning, the travelers should consult their healthcare provider. Also, pregnant women who have travelled to the outbreak areas should discuss their travel during prenatal visits in order to be assessed and monitored appropriately.

Guidance

Here are some strategies you can use to prepare for the Zika virus outbreak:

Determine the impact that the spread of Zika virus may have on your operations. The likelihood that your business will be impacted will depend on the location and types of operations. The following types of considerations may help you determine the potential seriousness of a Zika outbreak:

- Does your company have operations or facilities in areas with Zika virus transmission (as noted in Table 1)?
- Do you have operations in the Southern U.S.? While the presence of Zika has not been noted in mosquitos in the Southern U.S. as yet, the *Aedes aegypti* species mosquito is prevalent. Some spread of Zika virus may occur.
- Are your operations indoors, particularly in screened-in or air conditioned buildings, like manufacturing facilities or office-like occupancies or are your operations more outdoor based, like construction or oil/gas activities? Are your operations a combination? Outdoor operations may have greater exposure.
- Do you have employees who travel into the Zika transmission areas on business or who are stationed there in an expat arrangement? If so, you will need to determine if travel is to be restricted and if other steps will be necessary.

Take steps to minimize the presence of mosquitos. You should review your facilities or job sites in order to minimize the presence of standing water (where mosquitos breed) and consult with pest control professionals regarding the appropriate treatment methods and advice. Consider any potential areas where standing water may occur, such as process water containment, retention ponds, swimming pools, fountains or other water attractions. Assure that building openings are protected with doorways, screens or air curtains. Advise workers to use insect spray and wear long sleeve shirts and pants, if appropriate.

Review travel policies. In light of the CDC travel advisory, do you need to adjust any travel plans or policies that may put employees at risk? For example, if you are planning a large corporate event in the Caribbean, what precautions do you wish to take? Consider what precautions and travel flexibility you will allow your employees who may be traveling into the Zika transmission areas. For example, do you wish to allow workers who may be pregnant to delay travel plans?

Develop employee communication packages. Keep your employees informed with general information on the disease outbreak, the potential impact on your business and what your company is doing to address the outbreak. You may also want to communicate ways that employees can protect themselves, such as through the use of proper clothing and insect spray. Evaluate any changes you wish to make to your planning, operations or travel policies related to the outbreak. Advise travelers to watch for symptoms upon their return and seek medical attention as needed. There are many good resources available for information on Zika preparedness at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control website (<http://www.cdc.gov/zika/index.html/>) and CDC informational posters (<http://www.cdc.gov/zika/fs-posters/index.html>). Educational information, travel advisories and other materials may also be available from your state or local health department. You may also wish to get direction from your medical provider.

Conclusion

The current Zika virus outbreak in the Americas has raised concerns about the spread and impacts of this type of disease outbreak. By following some of the suggestions in this document, companies may minimize the impact that the Zika virus outbreak may have on their business. As with any emerging disease outbreak, the information on Zika is changing and current references should be monitored periodically for up to date information.

References

Key websites for further information:

- "Zika Virus." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 05 Feb. 2016. Web. 19 Feb. 2016. <http://www.cdc.gov/zika/index.html/> .
- "Recognizing, Managing, and Reporting Zika Virus Infections in Travelers Returning from Central America, South America, the Caribbean, and Mexico." *HAN Archive*. U.S. Centers for Disease Control, 15 Jan. 2016. Web. 19 Feb. 2016. <http://emergency.cdc.gov/han/han00385.asp> .
- "Travel Health Notices." U.S. Centers for Disease Control, 5 Feb. 2016. Web. 19 Feb. 2016. <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices> .
- CDC Interim Guidelines for Pregnant Women during a Zika Virus Outbreak — United States, 2016: Petersen EE, Staples JE, Meaney-Delman, D, et al. Interim Guidelines for Pregnant Women during a Zika Virus Outbreak — United States, 2016. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2016;65:30–33. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6502e1>.
- "Zika Virus Disease." *World Health Organization*. 8 Feb. 2016. Web. 19 Feb. 2016. <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/zika/en/> .

Appendices

Table 1, List of Countries with Zika Virus Transmission*

AMERICAS		OCEANIA/PACIFIC ISLANDS	AFRICA
Aruba	Guyana	American Samoa	Cape Verde
Barbados	Haiti	Samoa	
Bolivia	Honduras	Tonga	
Bonaire	Jamaica		
Brazil	Martinique		
Colombia	Mexico		
Costa Rica	Nicaragua		
Curacao	Panama		
Dominican Republic	Paraguay		
Ecuador	Puerto Rico		
El Salvador	Saint Martin		
French Guiana	Suriname		
Guadeloupe	U.S. Virgin Islands		
Guatemala	Venezuela		

*As of 2/18/2016 Source for updated information: U.S. CDC: <http://www.cdc.gov/zika/geo/index.html>

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