

Protecting the Unborn-Preventing Birth Defects

Zika Precautions for Garrett Countians

This week, April 24-30, is Maryland Zika Awareness Week. The campaign is part of Gov. Larry Hogan's effort to raise awareness about the virus and its prevention.

"After reviewing the current facts about what we know, and what we don't know about Zika infection, it is clear that the most certain way to prevent Zika from affecting an unborn is for a pregnant woman to defer travel to any area with active transmission of the Zika virus," said Dr. William Pope, Deputy Health Officer. "This would also include persons who are considering pregnancy but not using the most reliable means of deferring pregnancy, and those persons who would be in intimate contact with a pregnant woman."

"The reason for this recommendation is that we simply are unable at this time to most effectively prevent transmission of this often silent infection that can cause catastrophic damage to the unborn," Dr. Pope continued. "Such transmission depends on avoiding every bite of a possibly disease-carrying mosquito or by avoiding intimate contact with a person who is at risk, but may not know that they are carrying the infection."

The CDC recommends that pregnant women do not travel to countries which they list as having active transmission by mosquitos. This includes a total of 41 countries: all countries in Central America, the Caribbean, Mexico, northern South America, some islands in the Pacific, and one island off the coast of Africa. Visit this CDC webpage for up-to-date locations: wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/zika-travel-information.

If travel to these countries is unavoidable, the CDC recommends that pregnant women make every effort to avoid being bitten by aedes mosquitos using recommended repellants, wearing protective clothing (long sleeves, long pants, and a hat), avoiding spending a lot of time out of doors, and sleeping either in air-conditioned or screened rooms, or using a bed net. CDC's Level 2 Alert further cautions that a man traveling to a Zika transmission area, upon return if they never have had symptoms avoid intimate contact for a period of 2 months, or 6 months if they have had symptoms. CDC suggests that consistent use of condoms for this period might protect the woman and her unborn if the man is carrying the disease. Unfortunately, we cannot currently test a man to see if he is infectious.

Once a pregnant woman is infected there is no means of preventing the possible transmission of the infection to, or mitigating its effects on, her unborn.

There are important facts we know about Zika, but there are still many things we don't know.

The disease is usually transmitted by the Aedes mosquito. Although this mosquito can carry various diseases which cause more than 50,000 deaths each year world-wide, no country has been able to significantly control or eliminate transmission of these diseases.

The disease is usually silent; four out of five persons with the infection do not exhibit symptoms. When symptoms are present, they include fever, skin rash, conjunctivitis (red eyes), muscle and joint pain,

tiredness, and headache and may last for several days to a week. Symptoms are easily confused with Dengue, Yellow Fever and Chikungunya. The lab tests necessary to distinguish between these diseases are difficult and costly, and their use is restricted to pregnant women who have been exposed, or their intimate contacts who themselves were exposed or have had signs of Zika infection. There is evidence that transmission has occurred directly between persons, especially those who have shared intimate contact with the sharing of bodily fluids. The virus appears to persist for a longer period of time, even months, in semen, but it is not known for how long it remains infectious. A blood test can be done to check for Zika virus. Any person who thinks they may be at risk should contact their health care provider or the health department for more information and guidance.

We do not know if there is a safe time during pregnancy to travel to an area with Zika. If someone does travel and is bitten, we don't know how likely they are to get Zika. We don't know how likely it is that a baby will have birth defects from this infection.

Since the Zika situation is rapidly evolving, the Garrett County Health Department is closely monitoring the latest information, guidance, and recommendations from the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For more information call us at 301 334-7770 or 301 895-3111 or visit our website at www.garrettthealth.org.

As of today, Maryland has had nine confirmed cases of Zika virus infection in adults. All have been related to travel from areas of ongoing transmission; none have involved local transmission.

The Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene keeps a record of confirmed cases on its website: <http://goo.gl/oAqPF6>. For more information about the Zika virus, visit the CDC at <http://www.cdc.gov/zika/>.