

RiskTopics

Zika virus outbreak: Tips to help protect workers September 2016

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 suspected 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) and other public health agencies have issued alerts related to the Zika virus.

This Risktopic provides background on the current Zika outbreak and 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 article 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 species that spread chikungunya and dengue fever. The Zika virus was originally noted in 1947

¹ "Symptoms, Diagnosis, & Treatment." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 21 June 2016. Web. 29 Aug. 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 cases of mosquito transmission have occurred widely in Central and South America and select Caribbean Islands, so far Florida is the only U.S. state where mosquito transmission has been noted. In addition, cases of Zika virus have been noted generally in the U.S. among individuals who had recently traveled to Central and South America. 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, and sexual and transfusion events associated with infected individuals. Incidents of sexual transmission of Zika virus have been confirmed in the U.S. Research is continuing about potential for transmission through other body fluids. In August 2016, the CDC advised all blood banks in the U.S. to test donations for Zika virus. The transmission of the virus through bodily fluids is complicated by the potential that those infected will have no symptoms of the infection.

The *Aedes aegypti* species mosquito feeds during all hours of the day and night, 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 any water-holding container, such as tree holes, old tires or other discarded containers. Even small containers may be breeding grounds.

Currently, no vaccine or treatment for the virus is available. Both the WHO and the CDC are beginning efforts to develop a vaccine, but realistically, one will not be available for several years. Supportive treatment for infected persons 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.

You can help prevent Zika virus infection by avoiding mosquito bites by wearing light-colored clothing, including long sleeves and pants to minimize exposed skin, and using 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. When indoors, choose areas protected with screens or air conditioning. In areas where screens or air conditioning are not available, use mosquito nets to protect workers, particularly for sleeping.

The CDC has issued travel advisories beginning in January 2016 urging travelers to the affected areas to take special precautions to minimize mosquito bites. The center 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. CDC advisories have also outlined precautions to prevent the possible sexual transmission of Zika virus.

Guidance

Here are some strategies businesses 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 Appendix)?
- Do you have operations in the Southern U.S.? While the presence of Zika has only been noted in mosquitos in the state of Florida, the *Aedes aegypti* species mosquito is prevalent in much of the Southern U.S. Some additional 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, oil/gas activities, and outdoors maintenance and landscaping? Do your operations have a combination of indoor and outdoor activities? Outdoor operations may have greater exposure.
- Do you have employees who travel to the Zika transmission areas on business or who are stationed there in an expat arrangement? If so, you will need to determine if travel should 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? Inform travelers to areas with Zika transmission of the risks.

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>), including 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. 29 Aug. 2016. <http://www.cdc.gov/zika/index.html/> .
- "Guidelines for US Citizens and Residents Living in Areas with Ongoing Zika Virus Transmission." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 08 Aug. 2016. Web. 29 Aug. 2016. <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/us-citizens-living-in-areas-with-zika> .
- "Advice for People Living in or Traveling to South Florida." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 24 Aug. 2016. Web. 29 Aug. 2016. <http://www.cdc.gov/zika/intheus/florida-update.html> .
- "Travel Health Notices." U.S. Centers for Disease Control, 5 Feb. 2016. Web. 29 Aug. 2016. <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices> .
- CDC Interim Guidelines for Pregnant Women during a Zika Virus Outbreak — United States, July 2016: Oduyebo T, Igbinsola I, Petersen EE, et al. Update: Interim Guidance for Health Care Providers Caring for Pregnant Women with Possible Zika Virus Exposure — United States, July 2016. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) 2016;65:739–744. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6529e1>.
- "Zika Virus Disease." World Health Organization. 8 Feb. 2016. Web. 29 Aug. 2016. <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/zika/en/> .

Appendix

List of Countries with Zika Virus Transmission*

AMERICAS		OCEANIA/ PACIFIC ISLANDS	AFRICA	ASIA
Anguilla	Guyana	American Samoa	Cape Verde	Singapore
Antigua and Barbuda	Haiti	Fiji		
Argentina	Honduras	Kosrae, Federated States of Micronesia		
Aruba	Jamaica	Marshall Islands		
The Bahamas	Martinique	New Caledonia		
Barbados	Mexico	Papua New Guinea		
Belize	Nicaragua	Samoa		
Bolivia	Panama	Tonga		
Bonaire	Paraguay			
Brazil	Puerto Rico			
British Virgin Islands	Peru			
Cayman Islands	Saba			
Colombia	St			
Costa Rica	Barthelemy			
Cuba	Saint Lucia			
Curacao	Saint Martin			
Dominica	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines			
Dominican Republic	St Eustatius			
Ecuador	St Maarten			
El Salvador	Suriname			
French Guiana	Trinidad and Tobago			
Grenada	Turks and Caicos			
Guadeloupe	United States			
Guatemala	U.S. Virgin Islands			
Guiana	Venezuela			

*As of 9/14/2016 Source for updated information: U.S. CDC: <http://www.cdc.gov/zika/geo/active-countries.html>

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