

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) expands travel alert for the Zika virus to additional regions: are your employees at risk?

Reports about the Zika virus have been prominent in the news over the last few weeks. We know that the virus is transmitted to people through a mosquito bite. Most recently, there have been reports of identified transmissions purportedly linked to blood transfusion and sexual contact. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there have been reports of a serious birth defect of the brain called [microcephaly](#) (smaller than normal head size) and other poor pregnancy outcomes in babies of mothers who were infected with Zika virus while pregnant. As a result, the CDC has issued a travel health alert for people traveling to regions where Zika virus transmission is occurring, including the Caribbean, South America, Central America and Mexico.

Alert Level 2, Practice Enhanced Precautions

Updated [Zika Virus in the Caribbean](#)

February 12, 2016

In December 2015, the first local transmission of Zika virus infection (Zika) was reported in the Caribbean. Local transmission means that mosquitoes in the area have been infected with Zika virus, spreading it to people.

[Read More >>](#)

Source: CDC (<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices>)



CDC Travel Health Notices such as the one depicted here are posted on the website

<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices>. This site provides information on the risk of traveling to certain destinations and what precautions travelers should take in their travels.

Warning Level 3, Avoid Nonessential Travel

Alert Level 2, Practice Enhanced Precautions

Watch Level 1, Practice Usual Precautions

The Zika virus travel health notice is currently an Alert Level 2 which indicates that the risk to the traveler is increased and that the traveler should take enhanced precautions when traveling to this destination. The enhanced precautions outlined in the notice include protection from mosquito bites (covering skin, using insect repellents), postponement of unnecessary travel for women who are or could be pregnant and consulting a doctor prior to travel for women trying to become pregnant. In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO) recently issued a [statement](#) advising that the cluster of microcephaly cases constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The statement includes travel precautions in line with the CDC enhanced precautions and a recommendation that travelers be provided with up-to-date information about the potential risks.

Are your employees traveling to foreign countries?

Employees traveling to locations with active outbreaks could potentially be exposed to the virus. Exposure may lead to subclinical infection, illness, and illness sequelae (negative after effect). As noted above, the CDC website states that there have been reports of microcephaly and other poor pregnancy outcomes in babies of mothers infected with the Zika virus during pregnancy, but also points out that further studies are needed to evaluate the connection. In addition to medical costs, risks associated with the Zika virus can include lost workdays (due to illness), temporary or permanent disability, lost productivity and loss of key personnel. Additional losses could include workers compensation claims for injuries to the employee (depending upon the jurisdiction), and even possibly claims against an organization brought by the children of employees born with defects associated with the employees' viral exposure during work travel obligations.

What can you do to protect your employees traveling to these foreign countries?

The following are actions you can take to protect your employees:

1. Develop and implement policies concerning foreign travel. Policies should include:
 - a. Information about how your company will handle travel to foreign countries with active outbreaks or endemic diseases.
 - b. Details concerning the individuals in your organization responsible for monitoring foreign travel alerts and providing information about travel alerts/precautions to employees.
 - c. A discussion concerning the conditions, if any, under which you will restrict travel and who in your organization has the authority to implement these restrictions.
 - d. A discussion as to whether employees at higher risk for infection or poor infection outcome should be allowed to opt out of business travel to these locations and the process for such employees to make this request.

Note that many of these decisions will need to be made on a case-by-case basis depending on the specific concerns associated with the infectious disease and recommendations made by the CDC. For example, CDC is recommending postponement of travel for pregnant women traveling to areas where the Zika virus outbreaks are occurring. Based on this information, you may decide to impose certain restrictions on travel to these locations, or allow employees to opt out of such travel while these alerts are in effect.

2. Check CDC Travel Health Notices prior to travel. CDC travel restrictions and precautions should always be taken into consideration and travel against CDC guidance is not advised. When travel to regions with outbreaks does occur, the employer should ensure that the employee is aware of the potential risks and the precautions being recommended by CDC. The employee should be provided with the resources to comply with any precautions and, for those employees that may be at higher risk (i.e. pregnant, trying to become pregnant or certain medical conditions per their doctor), the option of opting out of travel to locations subject to travel health notices as appropriate.
3. Check US Department of State travel alerts and warnings. The U.S. Department of State issues travel alerts and warnings on their website <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings.html>. This site should also be checked prior to travel for alerts related to health and other potential concerns with travel to foreign countries.
4. Develop, implement and train staff concerning infection control policies/practices for clinical or foreign aid employees. If employees are traveling to areas where outbreaks are occurring to provide aid or assist with clinical trials, employers should have policies/procedures that outline safe practices for preventing infection while working in these countries.
5. Develop and implement occupational health procedures to include medical evaluation for employees that have been exposed (or might have been exposed) to the virus or fear that they may have been exposed and for employees that develop symptoms or illness. Travel

information should be provided to the healthcare provider during this medical evaluation. Your insurance carrier should be contacted for additional support.

While the focus of this article is travel exposures, employees actively working with the virus or handling clinical specimens in the U.S. may also be potentially exposed to the virus. Current recommendations are for the virus and clinical specimens to be handled using biosafety level 2 practices and containment as outlined in the [CDC/NIH Biosafety in Microbiological and Biomedical Laboratories](#) with a laboratory-specific risk assessment for procedures conducted in the laboratory. Berkley Life Sciences Risk Management Resources has biosafety resources available, including laboratory biosafety checklists, to assist you in evaluating your work areas.

Educating staff and taking appropriate precautions concerning potential travel risks such as those posed by the Zika virus will go a long way to ensuring the safety and health of your company's most prized asset – your employees.



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Donii Fox has over 20 years of experience in industrial hygiene and biological safety focusing on the biomedical research industry, academia and healthcare. Ms. Fox began her career managing industrial hygiene and biosafety programs at the University of New Mexico and later at the University of North Carolina. Her responsibilities included ensuring safe work practices for the handling of chemicals, infectious agents and recombinant DNA. In addition, she assisted in the development of operating procedures and policies, audited work areas and programs and provided input for the design and commissioning of containment laboratories (BSL3/ABSL3). Prior to joining Berkley Life Sciences, she was the ES&H Director at Lovelace Respiratory Research Institute where she managed all ES&H programs including fire and life safety, OSHA safety, environmental programs, biological, radiation and chemical safety and emergency management.

Ms. Fox has extensive experience with industrial hygiene sampling, biosafety levels 1, 2 and 3, select agents and toxins, evaluating research protocols and providing input on laboratory design. She has a Bachelor of Science degree in Occupational and Environmental Health Management from Ferris State University and a Master of Science degree in Public Health from the University of North Carolina.

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