



In Focus

The Zika Virus: Update, February 2016

In May 2015, the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) issued an alert following the [first confirmed case](#) of the Zika virus in Brazil. Since then, the virus has not only spread rapidly within Brazil, there have been reported cases in 23 American countries, including Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the virus is “[spreading explosively](#)”, with PAHO predicting that the Americas can “[expect three to four million cases](#)” of the Zika virus by the end of 2016. Cases of the virus have also been diagnosed in parts of Europe, reportedly as a result of people returning from the Americas.

Information Regarding the Zika Virus

The Zika virus is transmitted to people primarily through the bite of an infected *Aedes* mosquito, which tend to [breed](#) in stagnant water close to where humans live, and which also spread both the dengue and chikungunya viruses. In addition, the virus can be transmitted from a pregnant mother to her baby during pregnancy, or even at the time of birth. The US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also [report](#) that there has been one report of the virus possibly spreading through blood transfusion.

The CDC [note](#) that only one in five people infected with the virus become ill, however. For those who do show symptoms, the most common are fevers, rashes, joint pain and inflammation of the eyes. However, following the outbreak of the Zika virus in Brazil, the CDC state that there have also been “[reports of Guillain-Barre syndrome and pregnant women giving birth to babies with birth defects and poor pregnancy outcomes](#)”. Although at present there is no conclusive evidence that the Zika virus causes microcephaly—a rare brain defect—since October 2015, there have been [4,180 suspected cases](#) of microcephaly in Brazil alone. In contrast, there were just [150 cases](#) of microcephaly in 2014. At present, there is no vaccine available to treat the Zika virus.

Countries with cases of Zika virus in the Americas



Source: WHO 17-23 Jan 2016



Latest Developments

- The WHO [estimate](#) that 500,000 to 1.5 million people in Brazil have been infected with the Zika virus, whilst Colombia's National Health Institute [report](#) that, as of 30 January 2016, an estimated 20,297 cases of the virus have been found.
 - On 11 January 2016, health officials in the USA [confirmed](#) the first case of the Zika virus in the country—a woman who had previously travelled to El Salvador.
 - Later in January, the UK also [reported](#) cases of the virus, when three people who travelled to South and Central America were diagnosed upon returning to the country. According to [Public Health England](#), as of 27 January 2016, there have been five cases of the Zika virus which have been diagnosed in the UK as part of this outbreak.
 - On 27 January 2016, one Dane and two Swiss travellers who visited Central, Latin and South America were [diagnosed](#) with the Zika virus in their respective countries. The Dane is expected to make a full recovery, whilst the two Swiss travellers did not require hospital care.
 - On 30 January 2016, Jamaica also [confirmed](#) its first case of the Zika virus—a four-year old child. The child has since made a full recovery.
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The Domestic and International Response

On 26 January 2016, Brazil's Health Minister, Marcelo Castro, stated that the country was "[losing badly](#)" in its fight against the Zika virus, before [announcing](#) that 220,000 troops would go from home to home, handing out leaflets and offering advice to citizens on how to destroy mosquito breeding grounds. In Colombia and El Salvador, the Governments have advised that women delay pregnancy for six months and two years respectively. Further, a group of Brazilian lawyers, activists and scientists reportedly plan to ask the country's Supreme Court to [legalise abortions](#) for pregnant women who have contracted the Zika virus. At present, abortions in Brazil are illegal, with the exceptions being in cases of rape, health emergencies and, since 2012, [anencephaly](#)—a serious birth defect found in babies.

On 1 February 2016, the WHO [met](#) to decide whether to designate the Zika virus as a 'global emergency', and to determine the appropriate response. Following the meeting, WHO director, Margaret Chan, described the Zika virus as a "[public health emergency of international concern](#)", as a result of the increasing number of cases of microcephaly in Latin America. She also advised women to consider delaying travel to areas affected by the virus and, if they are living in areas where the Zika virus is prevalent, to seek advice from their physician and protect themselves from mosquito bites. The WHO were previously [criticised](#) for being too slow to react to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2013.

Further Information:

- World Health Organisation, [Zika Virus: Questions and Answers](#), 20 January 2016
- Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, [Symptoms, Diagnosis and Treatment](#), accessed 1 February 2016

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