



August 23, 2016

Zika Virus

The Zika virus has been in the news a lot lately, with warnings given to travelers to the Olympics in Rio and more recently, to travelers to Miami. The most serious problems related to Zika infection are Zika-related birth abnormalities, including microcephaly, or a very small head and brain, seizures, eye problems and irritability. Zika may also cause problems with the infant's heart, gastrointestinal and genitourinary systems. As with most issues with the developing fetus, the first 12 weeks of pregnancy are the most vulnerable time for Zika virus to possibly do its damage.

How is Zika virus spread? Zika virus is spread to people mostly through the bite of an infected *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which is very rarely found in Illinois, as this mosquito cannot survive freezing temperatures. This species of mosquito breeds in water-filled artificial containers like buckets, old tires, drip pans, etc., and not in ditches or flooded areas, like other mosquitos. Zika is NOT spread through coughing or sneezing. The Illinois Department of Public Health has announced that 51 cases of Zika infection have occurred in Illinois so far, but all of these cases have happened in people who have travelled in an area where active Zika transmission is occurring – there has been NO local transmission of Zika in Illinois from mosquito bites - and it is very unlikely because the mosquito is not found in Illinois. In contrast, Miami Beach and the Wynwood neighborhood in northern Miami have recently seen local transmission of Zika because the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito is found in Florida, and as of August 19, 2016, the total number of locally transmitted cases in Florida is 36.

Although mosquito bites are the main way that Zika virus is spread, Zika virus can be passed from a pregnant woman to her fetus during pregnancy or delivery, and Zika virus can also be passed when an infected man has sex with his partner.

What can we do to prevent Zika virus infection? There is no immunization or specific medication for Zika. For us in Illinois, women who are pregnant or might become pregnant should be very careful and protect themselves from mosquito bites if they travel to areas where there is active Zika virus transmission. These areas include: those areas of Miami noted previously; Mexico; all countries in Central America and the Caribbean-including Puerto Rico; most countries in South America; and some island countries in the South Pacific. Women who are pregnant or might become pregnant should also either abstain from sex or use protection like condoms if their sexual partners have travelled to areas where there is active Zika virus transmission.

The best way to prevent diseases spread by mosquitos is to protect yourself from mosquito bites by wearing long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and socks; using insect repellants; sleeping under a mosquito net; and treating clothing with permethrin.

If a person has travelled to areas with active Zika virus transmission and becomes infected with Zika, the most common symptoms of infection are fever, rash, joint pains, and conjunctivitis (red eyes), but many people may become infected and not have any symptoms. A blood test can be used to detect Zika infection.

So, the bottom line is that it isn't very likely that you could catch Zika from a mosquito bite here in Illinois, but it is still wise to prevent mosquito breeding by draining any standing water around your house. The most likely way to catch Zika is to travel to areas where it occurs and let a mosquito bite you, or have sex with someone who has travelled to those areas where it occurs. Women in the earliest stage of pregnancy are most at risk. Let's do what we can to prevent birth defects from Zika virus – in this case, prevention really is the best medicine.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Ford', written in a cursive style.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District