

June 21, 2016

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Zika virus disease; what you need to know

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ZIKA. Until recently, the virus was unknown by most people in the United States and the Northern Hemisphere. News reports have certainly changed this in the past few months. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predicts that there will most likely be local transmission of the disease in the United States, particularly in the southern states.

For us in Colorado Zika's effects should be minimal. Because of our cooler climate and high elevation, the mosquito that carries the virus is not present. However, transmission through sexual contact or while traveling through active Zika states is possible.

Infection with the Zika virus will go unnoticed for most people; some who are infected won't experience any symptoms. Generally, the virus will produce very mild symptoms with a slight fever, rash, headache, and red eyes. These symptoms may last from a couple days to a week. According to the CDC, individuals who contract the disease will likely have immunity from future infections.

The virus is especially dangerous for women who are pregnant or planning pregnancy as it has been associated with fetal birth defects. The World Health Organization and the CDC have reported studies confirming an association between Zika infection and microcephaly in newborns. Microcephaly is a birth defect in which the brain is underdeveloped and the head is abnormally small. Women who have contracted the disease either through the bite of an infected mosquito or through sexual contact with an infected male partner are at risk for developing these birth defects in their unborn children. According to the CDC, evidence has shown that a man who is infected with the virus can continue to transmit the virus through sexual intercourse for months following initial symptoms. Women should be aware of their partners' health and travel history and use condoms during sexual encounters. Any woman who is pregnant or considering pregnancy should seek specific counseling from her physicians prior to traveling to states or countries that may have active Zika transmission. When travel cannot be avoided, all precautions should be taken.

So if you have no choice but to travel to an area where Zika is present, what do you do? There are many ways to avoid mosquito bites. According to the WHO, the Aedes mosquito species carries Zika. It is a day feeder and is most active at dawn and dusk. Prevention methods include wearing light colored, long sleeve shirts and pants. Some manufacturers have created lines of clothing specifically designed to repel insects. Mosquito netting that is treated with permethrin is helpful as well. Permethrin is an insect repellent that can be applied to clothing and has been used by the military for years to prevent insect bites. Ensure your living areas have air conditioning or screens on the windows. When outdoors use a high quality DEET mosquito repellent and re-apply as needed after swimming.

Preventing the mosquito from breeding is most important. According to the WHO the Aedes mosquito does not travel very far during its lifespan, no more than 150-200 yards from its breeding site. It is a water breeder that can breed in any stagnant water source as little as that in a bottle cap.

But we live in Colorado and don't need to worry about this right? Well that is partially correct, the Aedes mosquito is not present in our state. However, there are other mosquito borne diseases that are, namely West Nile. This disease has the potential to spread in our area through the summer and fall seasons. Cleaning up mosquito breeding sites will help prevent the spread of this disease, and minimize the threat. So, prevention begins at home. Clean the areas around your homes of any possible breeding sites: old tires, barrels, trash, etc. And, daily clean and change water in dog bowls and kiddie pools.

We must all do our part to prevent the spread of infectious diseases in our communities. As new diseases are discovered and spread through the world we must help prevent infections and preserve life.

If you have questions or concerns about Zika virus disease, please talk to your health care provider. Evans Army Community Hospital is prepared to screen and test for Zika and our providers are continually informed with up-to-date information about the disease. Your and your family's health are our priority.

For more information on Zika, see:

Health topics: Zika virus (2016). World Health Organization.

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/zika/en/>

Zika Virus (2016). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<http://www.cdc.gov/zika/index.html>