



— Time to Talk —

THE ZIKA VIRUS

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THE SISTERS DISCUSS THE ISSUE OF ZIKA IN PREGNANCY

A couple of years ago, few people were familiar with the word Zika. Spread by daytime-active mosquitoes, its name comes from the forest in Uganda where it was first identified in the 1940s. For decades it was confined to a narrow area along the equator in Africa and Asia, and appeared to pose no serious health risk. But a few years ago it started spreading eastwards into the Americas and as more people became infected, it emerged that there was a correlation with Zika and brain defects in the unborn children of those who had been infected. The danger of Zika is not so much for the person affected – symptoms are mostly mild. The real risk is in pregnancy; we now know Zika can spread from a woman to her baby resulting serious birth defects, most commonly a condition called microcephaly. As a result, in 2016, the US Centre for Disease

Control & Prevention (CDC) issued travel notices, warning pregnant women, or couples trying to conceive, that visiting Zika areas would put their unborn child at risk. Here is our guide to managing Zika in pregnancy:

What if I've already been to a Zika area while pregnant?

Your GP will recommend that you be tested. This will either be a blood or urine test. If you test positive for Zika, obstetricians will keep a close eye on the development of your baby.

What is microcephaly?

Babies born with microcephaly have smaller heads because the brain has not developed normally during pregnancy. While they generally survive birth, these children frequently have intellectual disability, poor motor function and speech, abnormal facial features and seizures. There is no treatment, and usually

babies with the condition have reduced life expectancy.

What if I've booked a holiday and can't get my money back?

Don't go – it's just not worth it. You could try asking your travel insurance company if it will cover cancellation fees.

What if my partner has visited a Zika area while I'm pregnant?

He needs to be tested. Because Zika can be passed on through sex, you should not have sex without using condoms before the results are back.

We are trying to conceive but have just visited a Zika area, what should we do?

The advice is for women to wait eight weeks before trying. However, because Zika stays for longer in sperm, men need to wait for six months. So if you have both travelled, you both need to wait for six months

unless you get tested and have a negative result.

If I have Zika and am pregnant, what are the chances that our baby will have a brain defect?

Neonatal outcomes take years to determine, so there is no accurate data on this yet. That said, the risk of Zika to unborn children is significant so always follow the advice from the CDC.

Where do we need to avoid?

This is often changing, so check the cdc.gov website before you travel. Broadly, travel notices have been issued in parts of Central Africa, Central America, South America, the Caribbean and some Pacific islands. 

Dr Chiara Hunt and Marina Fogle are founders of The Bump Class, which provides antenatal classes in South Kensington and Parsons Green. thebumpclass.com