You may have heard a lot about the Zika virus. Anxiety is understandably high as we are learning more about this disease. There can be fear even if you live in an area where the disease hasn’t occurred. The information below may be helpful in managing any fear you might feel. Resources for up-to-date medical information and advice about the Zika virus are at the end of the article.

The Zika virus

The Zika virus is not new. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the disease was first identified in 1947. Outbreaks of the disease have been recorded in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Pacific.

The virus is primarily spread by infected Aedes mosquitoes. Transmission through blood transfusion and sexual contact has been reported. A pregnant woman may be at risk of transmitting the virus to her unborn child.

Symptoms of the disease are usually mild. They can include mild fever, skin rashes, conjunctivitis, muscle pain, and headache. These symptoms normally last for 2-7 days. A link between the Zika virus and Guillain-Barré syndrome (muscle weakness or paralysis) is being investigated. Infection during pregnancy may be linked to birth defects, such as microcephaly (a birth defect in which the size of a baby’s head is smaller than expected).

There is no specific treatment or vaccine for the Zika virus at this time. The best form of prevention is to protect against mosquito bites. Until more is known, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that women trying to get pregnant and their male partners talk to their health care professional before traveling to areas where Zika is known to be present.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO), 2016.

Managing fears

A good way to manage any kind of fear is to become educated about it. The more we know about the real dangers, the more we can take effective steps to avoid or minimize them, thereby putting some fears to rest. Accurate information is the best antidote to unrealistic fears. The resources at the end of this article are a good source of accurate information.

Put your risk into perspective. The risk of contracting Zika in the U.S. is low at this time. It’s important to stay aware and informed, but try to make sure your level of fear does not exceed your risk factors. If you are pregnant, planning to become pregnant, or traveling to areas where Zika has been found, talk with your health care professional to understand how you can lower your risk of infection.

Limit media exposure. Media news coverage can arouse emotion and increase fear. It’s important to get the facts, but it may not be helpful to hear the reports over and over. Be aware of how you and your family members respond to news stories. Turn off the television or avoid online coverage if it becomes distressing.
Focus on what you have control over. News stories and images can make us feel anxious and helpless in the face of the Zika virus. Learn what you can do to minimize your risk. The World Health Organization and U.S. government agencies have information about how to reduce your risk of contracting the virus. They offer advice and directions in the event you must travel to a place where the Zika virus has been identified. A link to travel information from the CDC is included at the end of this article.

Be always aware, but not always fearful. Awareness means paying attention to news that is specific to where you live and where you may travel. Awareness is not the same as being fearful. Constant fear that isn’t reality-based can be counter-productive. It can be harder to deal with a true danger when everything seems like a danger. We want to focus on what is happening vs. what could happen.

Talk about your fears or concerns with supportive others. We get emotional support by sharing our concerns. Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available 24/7 to offer support to you and your household members.

If children have fears, give them honest information at a level they can understand. You don’t need to explain everything about the virus and risk. Give them only as much information as they request. Encourage your children to talk to you about their thoughts and feelings. Listen to their concerns, and then reassure them. For example, point out that the risk in the U.S. and Canada is very, very low. Explain that there are steps that everyone can take to protect themselves. Limit your child’s exposure to news reports. Seeing repeated coverage can be disturbing. It can be helpful to watch the news with your child and discuss it afterwards.

We have to walk a fine line between awareness and fear. Try to keep your thoughts in sync with what is actually happening, not what your worst fears may be. If you have no reason to believe you have been exposed to the virus, you can go about your normal daily activities. Understand that national and international health organizations are working diligently to understand the risks and keep the public safe.

Resources for more information


