How I Got the Zika Virus and How You Can Too: Protecting Yourself and Your Family

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****This information was current as of the time the blog was published. However, information is constantly changing. Please visit **Zika Central** for the latest information.****

As a teratology information specialist, I counsel women and their families on medications, chemicals, herbal remedies, and illnesses that could harm developing babies. So as the Zika Virus, a viral infection that can cause severe birth defects including microcephaly (a condition where a baby's head is much smaller than expected, and may indicate a baby's brain has not developed properly during pregnancy), spread from the Polynesian Islands, to South America, to the Caribbean, I made sure to educate myself on everything we know about the virus, reading article after article and keeping up to date on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC's) recommendations to avoid infection, knowing that eventually I would need this information to counsel a pregnant woman or her family. I never imagined I would use this information to try to prevent becoming infected myself, and that I would fail.

One week in February I opened an email from my in-laws with the subject "30th Birthday Plan." My husband's 30th was a few weeks away, and I was excited to see what they had planned. As I read the email detailing a week-long sailing trip in the Caribbean I felt blessed, and honestly a little scared. I rushed to the CDC's page on Zika to look up whether the islands we were visiting had outbreaks. Sure enough-16 Caribbean islands, including the two we were visiting, had Zika outbreaks. At first I didn't want to go, which set off an intense inner debate racked with guilt. "How could I say no to a surprise trip for my husband, especially one planned and paid for by my in-laws?" I thought, and in the next second, "But what if I get Zika? I work with pregnant women, I can't expose them!" Finally, my Dad stepped in. "You're too adventurous to let Zika scare you away from a vacation." he said. "Fine," I thought, "I'll go, but I'm going to be careful."

I was careful. Despite the gentle teasing from my in-laws, I insisted on sleeping indoors with the windows closed, even though it was more comfortable outside. I wore bug spray with 30% DEET when I thought mosquitos would be out. I got three or so bites at dinner one night, and three more at the end of our trip. As we headed home I mentally patted myself on the back; "Only six bites," I thought, "pretty sure I didn't get Zika!" I was so sure that three days after our trip when I developed a head-to-toe rash I was certain it was an allergic reaction, but after three doses of Benadryl did nothing, I googled Zika-related rashes. Dead ringer. Symptoms of the Zika Virus include rash, joint and muscle pain, red eye, fever, and headache, and boy did I have them. I rushed in to see an infectious disease doctor, who came to the same conclusion. "My money's on Zika," he said. Suddenly everyone wanted a piece of me; my blood was sent to the county board of health, Emory's lab, and a lab in Washington for testing.

A call from the county board of health confirmed what my aching joints hinted at: I tested positive. My first thought was to thank my lucky stars that I have access to safe, reliable birth control. My second was to start worrying about those around me. I had brunch with a pregnant friend before I had symptoms-could I have given her Zika? Thankfully, the answer is no (more on that below)! I was amazed at how a short vacation and six bites could give me Zika. I thought about all the people going to the Caribbean for vacation. How many of them are pregnant or could become pregnant while traveling? Would they wear bug spray? Would they recognize the symptoms? How many are men who could get Zika and then unknowingly transmit it to their sexual partner? How many people are walking around not knowing they were infected? I called my friend and begged her to wear insect repellant for the rest of her pregnancy.

As of July 27, 2016, 1.658 cases of Zika, including 433 pregnant women have been confirmed in the continental United States; 4 cases of local transmission have been reported in Miami-Dade and Broward counties in Florida. There are likely far more cases since most people don't have symptoms, so never get tested. Zika is mostly spread through mosquito bites, but can also be spread through sex, blood transfusions, or from a mother to baby during pregnancy. We don't know how long the incubation period (the time between when you get infected and when you see symptoms) is, but it is likely a few days to weeks. For most people the virus stays in the blood for about a week, but some people still have the virus in their bodies for as long as two months. Currently, the only Zika outbreak in the continental United States is in a small area of Dade County, Florida, however,, the mosquitoes that can carry Zika are found in some areas of the US, making a Zika outbreak in the U.S. very possible. You can follow these steps to protect yourself:

1. If you are pregnant or could be pregnant (planning a pregnancy or not using birth control), don't travel to a country with an active Zika outbreak. You can find a list of current outbreaks here.

2. If your partner has traveled to a country with an active Zika outbreak and you are pregnant, use condoms correctly every time you have sex for the rest of your pregnancy. Why, you might ask? Because Zika can stay in semen longer than in blood, but we don't know exactly how long it stays there. To be as safe as possible, the CDC recommends using condoms for 6 months.

3. If your partner has traveled to a country with an active Zika outbreak and has symptoms of Zika (rash, fever, headache, joint pain, and conjunctivitis) use condoms correctly whenever you have sex and avoid pregnancy for at least six months. If he does not have symptoms, use condoms and avoid pregnancy for at least two months.

4. If you have traveled to a country with an active Zika outbreak and you are not pregnant, avoid pregnancy for at least two months. The Zika virus can also be transmitted from a woman to her sexual partner. Because of this, use condoms and/or a dental dam when you have sex for two months. Do not share sex toys.

5. If you are currently pregnant, avoid mosquito bites as much as possible by wearing bug spray outdoors (bug spray with at least 30% DEET is preferable; for information on the safety of DEET during pregnancy, see here), wearing long-sleeved shirts and pants, closing windows or using windows with screens, and removing any standing water from around your house. Two things to remember: the mosquitos that spread Zika are daytime biters and like to be indoors, and they can breed in pools as small as a bottle-cap.

If you have questions about the Zika virus or you have been infected or exposed and want free up-to-date information about what this could mean for a current or future pregnancy, you can contact a MotherToBaby expert by phone at (866) 626-6847 or by visiting https://mothertobaby.org//a>.

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MotherToBaby** is a service of OTIS, a suggested resource by many agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). If you have questions about viruses, alcohol, medications, vaccines, diseases, or other exposures, call MotherToBaby toll-FREE at 866-626-6847. You can also visit **MotherToBaby.org** to browse a library of fact sheets, **email an expert** or **chat live.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

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