Zika, Pregnancy, and Travel in a Post-Epidemic World

One of the most common Zika-related questions we get at MotherToBaby is, “What is the risk of Zika if I travel to Country X?” Or, a variation of the same: “We just got back from Country X. Do we ***really*** need to wait 3 months before we try to get pregnant?”

Back when the Zika epidemic was sweeping the western hemisphere, answering these travel-related questions was fairly straightforward. It was easier to know where there was a risk for Zika infection as governments and public health organizations around the world collaborated to identify and report cases. Since then, the number of reported Zika cases has fallen dramatically, but sporadic, low-level transmission continues to happen in some areas. Systems for detecting and reporting cases vary widely from country to country now, making it difficult to know the exact level of risk in any given area.

So, what’s a traveler to do?

First and foremost, all travelers should avoid mosquito bites to help prevent not only Zika, but also other diseases spread by mosquitoes. Preventing bites is important for everyone, especially those who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy and their partners. The best way to prevent mosquito bites while traveling is to use an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)-registered insect repellent with one of the following active ingredients:

- DEET
- Picaridin (also known as KBR 3023 and icaridin)
- IR3535
- Oil of lemon eucalyptus (OLE)
- Para-menthane-diol (PMD)
- 2-undecanone

Other ways to help prevent bites during travel include wearing loose-fitting, long-sleeved shirts and pants, and sleeping in areas free of mosquitoes (such as accommodations with window and door screens or air conditioning, or sleeping under a mosquito net).

Second, consider your destination.

Check for active Zika Travel Health Notices from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Travel Health Notices indicate areas with known current transmission of Zika.

After checking for Zika Travel Health Notices, visit the CDC interactive Zika map. The map uses different shades of blue to broadly classify Zika risk in countries and territories around the world:

- Dark blue areas have reported Zika transmission in the past and there could be current sporadic or low-level transmission in some areas. As in any area, there could be delays in detecting and reporting any new outbreaks.
- Medium blue areas have the kind of mosquitoes that most commonly spread Zika, but they have not reported Zika cases in the past.
- Light blue areas are not known to have the kind of mosquitoes that most commonly spread Zika, and they have not reported Zika cases in the past.

Third, learn the recommendations.

Learn the recommendations related to pregnancy based on your destination (summarized below). Depending on where you're thinking of going, CDC might advise that you avoid travel, take steps to prevent passing the virus to a partner through sex (sexual transmission), and/or delay pregnancy if you or your partner are planning to become pregnant. Preventing sexual transmission of Zika means using condoms or dental dams, not sharing sex toys, or not having sex for 2 months after travel (for biological females) or 3 months after travel (for biological males). If delaying pregnancy after travel, follow these same timeframes (2 months after travel for biological females and 3 months after travel for biological male partners).

Recommendations for areas with a Zika Travel Health Notice:

- If you are pregnant, avoid travel to these areas.
- If your partner is pregnant and you must travel to these areas, prevent mosquito bites and sexual transmission during and after travel according to the guidelines and timeframes above.
- If you or your partner are planning a pregnancy and you choose to travel to these areas, prevent mosquito bites, prevent sexual transmission, and delay pregnancy after travel according to the guidelines and timeframes above.

Recommendations for areas with current or past transmission (dark blue on the map):

- If you or your partner are pregnant and you choose to travel to these areas, be sure to prevent mosquito bites. If you are concerned about Zika, prevent sexual transmission during and after travel according to the guidelines and timeframes above.
- If you or your partner are planning a pregnancy, be sure to prevent mosquito bites. If you are concerned about Zika, prevent sexual transmission during and after travel and consider delaying pregnancy according to the guidelines and timeframes above.

For travel to all other areas with mosquitoes, take steps to prevent bites.

Lastly, talk to your healthcare provider.

Talk to your healthcare provider about any questions or concerns. They can help you consider the nature of your travel, your ability to prevent mosquito bites and sexual transmission, the risks associated with a potential Zika infection, your pregnancy plans, and any other factors specific to you, your partner, and your circumstances.

MotherToBaby specialists are also available to talk with you about Zika or other travel-related exposures before or during pregnancy. Safe and happy travels!

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