Spring Break Safety for Pregnant and Breastfeeding Women: Tips for a Fun and Safe Holiday

Spring break is often associated with young college students flocking to the beaches to take a break from their studies. However, it is now embraced by a diverse crowd, including families with pregnant and breastfeeding women. Spring break typically takes place between March and April each year, leading to masses of people traveling by planes, trains, and automobiles. Fun times are possible for everyone, and we have guidance to increase the chances that your travels and experiences will be comfortable and safe for you and your baby.

Check-In with Your Doctor

For most pregnant women, traveling by airline, train, car, or bus is generally safe until close to their due date. Regardless of your trimester, a quick check-in with your doctor is essential to ensure you are cleared to travel.

- **First Trimester**: If you are experiencing pregnancy-related nausea, prepare ahead with needed medications and a plan to stay hydrated.
- **Second Trimester**: If you are healthy, this is a great time to travel.
- **Third Trimester**: You should be fine to travel, but keep in mind that if you go into early labor, you don't want to be far from high-quality obstetrical care. Check for hospital locations at your destination.

Check for Infectious Disease Warnings

If you are traveling outside of the U.S., check for disease warnings or recommended vaccines for your destination on the CDC Travelers' Health page. Additionally, if your destination has mosquitoes, use insect repellants to reduce the risk of exposure to infectious diseases.

Sun Exposure and Heat

Prolonged sun exposure can lead to overheating and dehydration, and in severe cases, heat stroke. High fever is a potential concern for pregnant individuals in any trimester. Prevention is key:

- Keep hydrated.
- Protect against direct sun for prolonged periods (sit under an umbrella or go indoors).
- Use sunscreen.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Avoid alcohol and limit caffeine, as they can increase dehydration.

Sunscreen

Everyone, including pregnant and breastfeeding women, should use sunscreen year-round. While there is some evidence that chemical sunscreens can penetrate the body in very small amounts, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) recommends the use of effective sunscreen. For breastfeeding women,

remember that sun exposure does not provide enough vitamin D for your baby; the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends 400 IU of vitamin D daily for breastfed babies.

Dietary Concerns

One of the highlights of travel is enjoying local food. For pregnant women, the risks from food-borne illnesses remain the same whether at home or on vacation. Avoid unpasteurized milk products, undercooked meats, and fish from risky categories.

Alcohol

Alcoholic beverages may be a destination goal for many, but pregnant and breastfeeding women are urged to continue following the warnings:

- **Pregnant Women**: It is crucial to avoid alcohol, as there is no known safe amount to drink. The risks to the developing baby are significant and can be devastating. Increasingly, restaurants are creating delicious and inviting mocktails (non-alcohol) and other beverages, offering an alternative that does not single out a person from the crowd.
- **Breastfeeding Women**: Limiting alcohol is beneficial as it can decrease the amount of breastmilk produced. It is recommended to breastfeed after two hours per drink to reduce the risk of exposure to the baby and developing brain.

Following these recommendations and reminders can help prevent exposures and experiences that could later cause grief and anxiety. Prepare well and enjoy your holiday! Ideally, a well-planned spring break will lift your spirits, provide a mental health break, allow you to enjoy new or favored foods, and create new and wonderful memories.

References and Additional Information:

CDC:

https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/sun-exposure

https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/heat-stress/about/illnesses.html

https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/sun-exposure

https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding-special-circumstances/hcp/diet-micronutrients/vitamin-d.html

https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel

ACOG

https://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/travel-during-pregnancy

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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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Back when Zika swept the western hemisphere, the travel recommendations for women who were pregnant or planning a pregnancy were clear: avoid any areas that had a risk of Zika infection. It was fairly easy to know where those areas were, as governments and public health organizations around the world worked tirelessly to identify and report cases. World maps showing areas of risk provided clear "yes/no" guidance. Was there any doubt about who shouldn't travel where? Not really. Not back then.

But what about now? The number of reported Zika cases has fallen dramatically in recent years. However, the accuracy of reporting can vary widely from country to country, so the once-clear world map of Zika risk now appears much less well-defined.

One of the most common Zika-related questions we still get at MotherToBaby is, "How likely is it that I'll get Zika if I travel to Country X?" (Or a variation of the same: "We went to Country X. Do we ***really*** need to wait 3 months before we try to get pregnant?") One resource to help answer that question is the interactive world map maintained by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to illustrate areas with Zika risk. Visit the map now and you'll find four colors, each indicating a different level of Zika risk and the corresponding recommendations for pregnant women, their partners, and those who are planning pregnancy. Let's take a look at what each color means :

- **Red** areas have active Zika transmission. ***Travelers to red areas are at risk of Zika infection.***
  - Pregnant women and their partners should avoid all unnecessary travel to red areas.
  - Couples and individuals who travel to red areas should wait at least 2 months (women) or 3 months (men) before trying to get pregnant, and have only protected sex during that wait time.
- **Purple** areas have had active Zika transmission sometime in the past, and there could still be sporadic cases. ***Travelers to purple areas might be at risk of Zika infection.***

Pregnant women, their partners, and those who are planning pregnancy are encouraged to talk with their healthcare

providers to make decisions about travel to purple areas. Careful consideration should be given to the risks and consequences of Zika infection in pregnancy, the nature of their travel, how much potential risk they are willing to accept, how soon they want to get pregnant (if they are not already), and any other factors specific to that individual or couple at that time.

- If pregnant women or their partners decide to travel to purple areas, they should take steps to minimize risk, including using insect repellent and considering the use of condoms for the rest of the pregnancy.
- Women planning pregnancy who travel to purple areas should also take steps to minimize risk, including using insect repellent and considering following recommended wait times before trying to get pregnant (2 months for women, 3 months for men).

There is a sub-category of **light purple**, which shows higher elevations above 6,500 feet where mosquitoes that can transmit Zika don't usually live. The chance of getting Zika in light purple areas is very low. However, be sure to consider if your travel plans would take you through dark purple areas on the way to these lighter purple zones.

- **Yellow** areas have mosquitoes that can transmit Zika, but have not had reported cases of Zika transmission. ***Travelers to yellow areas are at low risk of Zika infection.***
  - All travelers to yellow areas should take precautions to prevent mosquito bites.
- **Green** areas do not have mosquitoes that can transmit Zika and have not had any reported cases of Zika transmission. ***Travelers to green areas are not at risk of Zika infection.***
  - There are no Zika-related travel recommendations for green areas.

Given that many countries are included in the purple category, how does this map help you know what your risk ***really*** is if you travel to a purple area? The answer is that it doesn't. Purple only tells you there is ***some*** level of risk. Here's why purple—and we at MotherToBaby—can't be more specific:

- ***Reliable data for every country around the world simply does not exist.*** Since Zika virus is no longer considered a public health emergency, many resources that once helped support global data collection have moved on to other, more pressing issues.
- ***The level of risk within a purple country could change without us knowing right away.*** The ability of any country to quickly identify and report cases depends on resources, logistics and other factors. This means there could be delays in detecting and announcing any new outbreaks.

The bottom line is that our post-Zika-epidemic world requires that we take the health of current and future pregnancies into consideration when planning travel. Ask ourselves how much potential risk we are willing to accept when we book our vacations and business trips. Does that mean that couples and individuals who want to have children should never go to areas that ever had Zika? Not at all! But if they are currently pregnant, or are not willing or able to effectively prevent pregnancy for at least 3 months after traveling, they might prefer to visit one of the many areas where there is no known risk of Zika. (Think yellow! Think green!)

MotherToBaby is here to answer your questions about Zika or other exposures before or during pregnancy. Happy travels!

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It's that time of year again, when the holidays invite family gatherings, and colder, shorter days make us long for sunny destinations. Yes, the winter travel season is upon us! Remember winters past when COVID-19 wasn't around and we'd never heard of Zika? When we didn't give much thought to health concerns related to hopping on a plane or going to busy holiday venues? Things are different now. If you're pregnant, you might pause before booking airline tickets or RSVPing "yes" to that extended family reunion. Take a moment to consider the possible risks associated with your plans, and how you might reduce them (by taking precautions) or eliminate them (by making alternate plans instead). Here are a few things to think about:

COVID-19:

Try as we might, we can't escape it or wish it away. We are, in fact, still in the middle of a pandemic, with new variants appearing and cases still rising and falling unpredictably in most places. Traveling on public transportation (such as airplanes, ships, trains, subways, taxis, and ride shares) can make getting and spreading COVID-19 more likely. So can being in crowded indoor spaces, especially if not everyone in those spaces is fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and/or wearing a mask. Having COVID-19 in pregnancy can increase pregnancy risks such as stillbirth and preterm delivery. So, how can you eliminate or reduce your chance of exposure to the virus?

- **Avoid public transportation.** If you must travel, using your own vehicle with members of your own household is the safest bet. Using drive-thrus or packing your own food to stop and eat along the way is safer than eating in crowded restaurants full of other holiday travelers.

- If you must travel on a plane or use other public transportation, **wear a well-fitting mask** the whole time (this is required), **stay at least 6 feet away** from other travelers when possible, and **wash your hands**/use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer frequently. Most importantly, make sure you're **fully vaccinated** before you travel, including getting a booster dose when you're eligible.

- Did I mention making sure you're **FULLY VACCINATED** before travel? It's the single best way to reduce the chance of getting very sick if you're exposed to the virus that causes COVID-19. Pregnancy and being very sick don't go well together, so this one is really, really important, whether you're traveling or not. MotherToBaby has helpful resources on the COVID-19 vaccines and booster shot, and you can contact us to talk through any questions or concerns you may have about getting the vaccine.

- Even if you're fully vaccinated, you might still consider **wearing a mask indoors** during holiday gatherings (and elsewhere), especially if you're getting together with people from different households coming from different places. If everyone else at the gathering also wears a mask indoors, even better.

- Find more tips and information about safer holiday celebrations and travel in the time of COVID at this link: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays/celebrations.html.

Influenza (the Flu):

Flu season carries its own risks for people who are pregnant. Like COVID-19, having the flu during pregnancy increases the chance of being very sick compared to people who aren't pregnant. Many of the same precautions that apply to COVID-19 apply to the flu as well:

- **Get the flu shot.** Like the COVID-19 vaccine, the flu shot can be given at any time during pregnancy, and can even be given at the same time as a COVID vaccine or booster. The sooner you're vaccinated, the sooner you and your pregnancy will have good protection against becoming very sick from the flu. And (bonus!) getting vaccinated in pregnancy may pass some protective antibodies to your developing baby.

- **Avoiding public transportation and crowded indoor spaces** will also reduce your chance of exposure to the flu virus. **Washing your hands frequently**/using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer is also an excellent flu prevention technique.

Zika:

Yes, Zika is still around. There are no known "outbreaks" of Zika anywhere in the world at this time, but there is ongoing, low-level, sporadic transmission in some places. Having Zika during pregnancy increases the chance of serious and lifelong effects for a developing baby. There is no vaccine against the Zika virus.

- The safest course in pregnancy (or if you're trying to conceive) is to **avoid travel** to places with a chance of

exposure. Unfortunately, it's virtually impossible now to know the exact risk of being exposed to Zika in any given country, but if you must travel, you can use the CDC's Zika map to help you plan.

- If you travel,**use insect repellent** and take other precautions to help avoid mosquito bites, such as wearing long sleeves and pants. If your partner travels with you, take steps to **avoid sexual transmission of Zika**. If you're planning a pregnancy, follow the recommended wait times (2 months for women, 3 months for men) before trying to conceive.

Other infections:

If you're considering international travel, there may be other infections to consider, such as malaria and foodborne illnesses. You might also need other vaccines, so be sure to review the current vaccine recommendations for your destination. Some vaccines can be given during pregnancy, but it's a good idea to check with your healthcare provider or contact MotherToBaby to discuss the risks and benefits of specific vaccines as you're deciding about travel.

Medical concerns:

Other travel considerations include the increased chance of blood clots during travel if you're pregnant, and where you will receive medical care in case of unexpected preterm labor or another medical emergency. Before any travel, be sure to talk with your healthcare provider about any additional considerations that are specific to you and your pregnancy.

Given all these considerations, if you're pregnant you might decide this year is a good one to enjoy low-key holidays at home and save the travel for another time. However you decide to spend the season, we hope it's safe, healthy, and happy!

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Chelsea's chat came through late on a Wednesday afternoon: "Hi, I'm 23 weeks pregnant and have plans to visit my family in a different state this holiday season. My sister just had a baby and is breastfeeding, and my grandparents will also be there, so I want to be as safe as possible with COVID-19 still spreading. What do you think I should do?"

With Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, and Kwanzaa all quickly approaching, questions like this are coming into our chat service more frequently. We're living in a new normal, and in the midst of rising COVID-19 case counts throughout much of the country, we're all trying to figure out the safest way to celebrate with our loved ones this year.

I told Chelsea there were many individual factors that go into a decision like hers, but we could go over a few guiding principles to help her make an informed choice.

Stay Home When Possible

Staying local and celebrating in-person only with other members of your household is the safest approach this year. This is especially true for pregnant individuals, who the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considers a group that is at "increased risk of severe illness" from COVID-19. While celebrating in such small numbers is certainly not how any of us want to spend the holidays, it's the best way to keep everyone safe. And if someone from outside of your immediate family really wants to join in on the fun – virtual get togethers are a great option!

Preparing to Travel

If it's not possible for you to stay home, then prepare, prepare, prepare! One of the most important things individuals can do this holiday season is prepare for their trip ahead of time. Most importantly, this means taking precautions to limit your own exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19 for 14 days before you plan to depart. This may include things like less frequent trips to the grocery store, keeping kids home and socially distancing them from their friends, working remotely when possible, and avoiding any pre-holiday gatherings. If you have to go on an important outing

(such as a prenatal visit), keep in mind the prevention basics: wash your hands, maintain distance, and wear a mask.

Getting tested for COVID-19 is another way to reduce risk prior to gathering. This is especially important to do if you develop any symptoms that could be COVID-19 (fever, cough, shortness of breath, loss of taste or smell, etc.). The test itself is not perfect and any interaction you have after the test is completed would put you at risk of exposure again, but for some families having a negative COVID-19 test can be a helpful tool in the preparation toolbox.

Choosing how you travel will also be important this year. Driving to your destination is one way to limit your exposure to others and reduce the risk of getting sick in transit. If you have to fly, take a bus, or get on a train, you will likely be surrounded by many other people, which is more of a potential risk. Get your hand sanitizer and mask ready if you have to go this route!

One other important thing you can do before traveling? Get a flu shot (ideally at least 14 days ahead of time)! While it won't protect you from COVID-19, it will help prevent the flu, which can be serious for pregnant women. It will also help keep you from needing medical care, which is important since some communities are reaching max capacity in their hospitals and may not have room to admit you for treatment.

Think about Grandma

Next, you want to think about who you will be traveling to see. We know that certain individuals are more likely to get very sick and/or die from COVID-19. This includes older adults (with risk increasing with age) and those with underlying medical conditions such as type 2 diabetes, severe obesity, cancer, or pregnancy. Chelsea's grandparents were in their late 80's, and her grandma was also a smoker. She also had her new nephew to think about, and her sister who was breastfeeding. What seemed like a simple family gathering quickly became a lot more complex when everyone's health was assessed.

If you have a high-risk individual in your family, it's important that you consider their health when planning holiday travel. For some families, this may mean making the decision to break the wishbone virtually over FaceTime or Zoom. For others, it could mean a strict 14 day quarantine for all who will be gathering (discussed above) before any interactions take place.

Celebrating Safely

Whether Chelsea chooses to travel or stay close to home during the holidays, she can reduce the chance of coming into contact with the virus by continuing to take precautions while celebrating with others. Limiting activities to people in your own household obviously presents the least risk since you're already together anyway. But if you do host or attend gatherings with others, keep in mind that smaller groups in outdoor spaces where everyone wears a mask, stays at least 6 feet apart, and practices good hand hygiene is a much safer option than attending large indoor gatherings where not everyone wears a mask or follows other common sense precautions. Your decision to spend time around others should also consider the current spread of COVID-19 in the community where you live or where you will be traveling. I encouraged Chelsea to check the state department of health website for guidelines and recommendations for her destination.

What would a holiday celebration be without FOOD? You can still enjoy your favorite pregnancy-safe foods and beverages (no soft cheeses! no alcohol!), but you want to do what you can to reduce the chance of contact with any foodborne germs. Even though the chance of getting COVID-19 from contact with food or serving utensils is probably low, it's important that everyone wash their hands before preparing, serving, or eating food. Having only 1 or 2 people serve the food to everyone else while wearing a mask is a better choice than having lots of people handle the serving utensils or food containers. As yummy as potlucks or buffets can be, at least for this year it might be safer if each guest brings food and drinks for themselves and their own household members only, or picks up ready-to-serve items. In addition, since people clearly can't be masked and eat at the same time, plan ahead and get creative to create space between people when they sit down to eat – this year is definitely not the time to pile 12 people around a 6-person table! And as always, be sure that hot items are consumed hot, and cold items are consumed cold – no one wants a food-borne illness like E.coli or salmonella!

When the Party's Over

After attending any gatherings (even small ones) or staying with relatives, Chelsea will need to pay attention to any symptoms that could suggest possible COVID-19 infection. If she, or anyone else she spent time with, has symptoms or tests positive for COVID-19, she should contact her healthcare provider right away about testing and/or follow any instructions from her local health department. She will most likely need to self-isolate at home for 14 days. In addition, she should contact her hosts as soon as possible to let them know, so they can inform other guests and family members that they might have been exposed to the virus. Not fun, but a necessary part of helping keep us all healthy and safe throughout the holiday season.

Chelsea has a lot to consider this holiday season, as we all do. For more tips on celebrating safely during the holidays, visit the CDC's website on COVID-19 and holiday celebrations. And for more information about COVID-19 and pregnancy and breastfeeding, see our MotherToBaby fact sheet. However you choose to celebrate, we wish you a happy and healthy holiday season!

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