Father's Day Food for Thought: Zika in a Man's World

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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.****

When it comes to pregnancy, so much of the attention is focused on the woman: her nutrition, her health, her behavior and just about her whole world comes under scrutiny in order to promote a healthy pregnancy; but what about the man? His nutrition, health, and behavior hardly comes under that same intense scrutiny…until now. Enter Zika virus. A man who has traveled to a Zika-affected area and has a wife/girlfriend who is pregnant must play an active role in protecting his partner and baby from possible Zika infection. Even if his partner is not currently pregnant, a man must be aware of his role when it comes to preventing the spread of the Zika virus. Father's Day starts well before you actually become one, men….here's why:

This illness, which is spread by the bite of a mosquito, took the world by surprise last fall when an unusually high number of babies, particularly in Brazil, were born with small heads and brains, a birth defect called microcephaly. Zika is a mild illness and typical symptoms include fever, skin rashes, muscle and joint pain, headache and conjunctivitis or red eyes. These symptoms normally last for 2-7 days. Some adults do not even know that they are infected because they have no symptoms while others will recover with rest, fluids and taking over-the counter medications to control symptoms. While Zika is a mild illness for many adults, if a pregnant woman becomes infected she can pass the infection to her child and, as a result, increase the chance that her child may be born with microcephaly and other abnormalities. To complicate matters more, it became clear that Zika can be transmitted by a man to a woman through sex or intercourse. The virus can be spread before symptoms begin and after symptoms end. Also Zika virus can remain in the blood of an individual for a week (or sometimes longer), but in regards to men Zika can remain in semen even longer than in the blood. Since we still don't know how long Zika can remain in the semen, a man has to be more proactive than reactive when it comes to protecting his partner and future baby.

And ladies, our men, especially fathers-to-be, are thinking about Zika and are making some life changing decisions to protect the welfare of their families. Take, for example, cyclist Tejay van Garderen (27 years old) who is considered a medal contender for this year's summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He has decided to withdraw from consideration to be a part of the US Olympic team because his wife Jessica is pregnant and he doesn't want to put her or the well-being of his unborn child at risk by possibly contracting Zika and passing the infection on to them. "I don't want to take any chances. If anything were to happen, I couldn't live with myself." When you consider that Tejay will now have to wait 4 more years to fulfill his Olympic dreams and put all that training on hold for his wife and child, that is chivalry at its finest. (All I can hear is the song "When a Man Loves a Woman" playing in my mind right now!)

So what is a man to do?

If you have a pregnant partner and you have traveled or lived in a Zika-affected area:

The most conservative approach is to not have sex during the entire pregnancy. Although the thought of not having sex for several months might seem like the end of the world for some, the health and welfare of your child is well worth the sacrifice.

However, every couple has to do what will work for them, so if abstaining from sex is not possible then it is important to use a condom correctly and consistently while having sex for the entire time of intercourse. Condoms should be used regardless of whether you are having vaginal, anal or oral (mouth to penis) sex, even if you do not have symptoms. Remember: since Zika virus is found in semen, the idea is to make sure your partner has no contact with semen. Think, knight in shining latex armor, right? Yet another chance for chivalry, guys.

If your partner is not currently pregnant:

If you and your partner are planning or actively trying to get pregnant but you've recently traveled to or lived in a Zika-affected area, experts advise you to hold off on getting pregnant. The length of time you delay would depend on

whether you've had symptoms of Zika infection: delay 6 months men, if you have had symptoms, or 8 weeks if your wife or girlfriend had symptoms.. Avoid sex or be sure to use condoms every time , as mentioned before, during this period. If neither one of you have experienced symptoms than it is advised that you wait 8 weeks before trying.

Even if you are not planning a pregnancy, it is advisable to wear condoms every time you have sex because (well, you know) accidents have been known to happen! And you can even go a step further by not having sex for 8 weeks after you return from a Zika-affected area, if you have had no symptoms or for 6 months if you do.

Other Means of Prevention

Here in the United States, we do not yet have local cases of Zika – meaning that all reported cases in the US to date are from individuals who lived in or traveled to Zika-affected areas and have traveled back to the United States. While this is reassuring, we cannot be completely at ease and need to take the proper steps to prevent infection – especially since there is no vaccine or medicine to treat Zika. The use of insect repellents is an important tool in the prevention of Zika for everyone and especially those who are traveling back to the United States from Zika infected areas. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has some great info about Zika prevention:
http://www.cdc.gov/zika/prevention/

If you are uncertain about your risk of infection, you should talk to your doctor sooner than later so that they can make a proper assessment of your level of risk. Zika testing is available for people who believe they have been exposed through sex and have symptoms; however, keep in mind that testing blood, semen or urine will not tell you the level of risk for passing the infection to someone during sex. In addition, because Zika can remain longer in semen than in blood, a man could get a negative blood or urine test but still have the Zika virus in their semen.

So men, prepare for your most chivalrous self. We need you in the fight against Zika! Your partner and future child will appreciate all you do to protect them.

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MotherToBaby is a service of the international Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (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 or try out MotherToBaby's new text counseling service by texting questions to (855) 999-3525. You can also visit MotherToBaby.org to browse a library of fact sheets, email an expert or chat live. MotherToBaby recently released an evidence-based Zika virus fact sheet for concerned pregnant and breastfeeding women. It can be found here: https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/zika-virus-pregnancy/

References:

Macur, Juliet. (2016, June 3) Fearing Zika, a Top American Will Skip the Olympics. He May Not be the Last. The New York Times (Sports of The Times). Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/04/sports/olympics/zika-cycling-tejay-van-garderen.html?_r=0

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

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