

### **Just the Facts: What you need to know about the Zika virus**

Many of you have no doubt read about the Zika virus, and you may be a bit concerned. The virus is transmitted by mosquitoes, mostly by those within the *Aedes* genus common to our area. The virus is very similar to dengue fever, West Nile virus, yellow fever, etc. but it's not a new virus. In fact, it's been known throughout the tropics since the 1940's. It has an interesting history with the name referring to a forest in Uganda, the Zika Forest. Sporadic outbreaks have occurred for years, but in 2015 the virus had spread into South and Central America and the Caribbean. With large outbreaks reported in those areas, reports of serious complications in new born babies and birth defects involving neurological and autoimmune disorders increased. To date, there's been no scientific correlation between the Zika virus and these severe birth defects, but based on the pattern of spread and locations heavily populated with mosquitoes, epidemiological experts are betting the two are correlated. Soon, research will give us the facts, but given the severity of the birth defects, it's easy to see why many scientists are willing to forego the proof for now to spread the word about prevention.

In most healthy adults, symptoms are mild to even non-existent. Fever, achiness, malaise, and symptoms common of a flu or cold are the most reported. Despite symptoms, our immune systems typically deal with the culprit and most of us would probably never even realize we'd been infected. In pregnant women, however, infection can result in serious complications even leading to death of unborn children. More commonly, children are born with abnormally small heads and brain damage. Known as microcephaly, the defects are commonly documented in mothers infected with the virus while pregnant. There may even be a link between Zika infection and Guillain-Barré Syndrome, where the immune system overreacts attacking the person's nervous system. Having no known cure, treatments are limited. The promise of vaccines is still years away, but UF/IFAS scientists are working quickly to learn more about the how efficient mosquitoes are at spreading the virus and how to prevent spread. The best method of control is prevention. So, share these preventative measures about Zika virus (especially those expecting) and practice them at home as well.

1. Limit exposure to mosquitos by wearing long sleeves and pants.
2. Avoid activities during dusk/evening when mosquitos are most active.
3. When outside, apply a product containing DEET – an approved repellent. Apply it based on label directions and reapply as directed.

4. Drain, remove and cover any areas where water collects. This includes toys in the yard, tarps, boats, buckets, gutters (clean them out), bird baths (refresh the water weekly), old tires, flower pots, etc. Stop and look around – there are inevitably places where water will stand.
5. Plants – watch out for plants that hold water. They are a repository for mosquito eggs and larvae. Think bromeliads – the tanks hold water. Instead of having to empty them out, consider adding mosquito bits or dunks, which you can buy at most retail stores. These bits or dunks are made of BTi, which is a variant of *Bacillus thuringiensis*. You may recognize that bacterium as a common biological control agent. It's safe when used correctly (always follow the label as it's the law) for plants and wildlife.
6. Finally, don't panic. We face all sorts of potential threats daily and our bodies are quite good at protecting us. Just remember to help educate folks responsibly.

For more information, call the UF/IFAS Pasco County Extension Office at 352-518-0156.

An Equal Opportunity Institution. UF/IFAS Extension, University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, Nick T. Place, dean for UF/IFAS Extension. Single copies of UF/IFAS Extension publications (excluding 4-H and youth publications) are available free to Florida residents from county UF/IFAS Extension offices.