



Zika a new occupational risk factor for Canadians

Caution especially needed for pregnant workers while travelling

The news is everywhere. The Zika virus outbreak threatened the 2016 Olympics. Many top athletes refused to participate citing the Zika virus risk. In South America, cases of microcephaly — a condition in which a baby's head is significantly smaller than expected due to abnormal brain development — are overwhelming the health-care system. Latin American and Caribbean nations are urging women to postpone pregnancy for two years as scientists grapple with the largest Zika virus epidemic to date. For only the fourth time in history, the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the spread of a disease to be a "public health emergency of international concern." The Zika virus joins the H1N1 pandemic (2009), the spread of polio (2014) and the Ebola outbreak (2014) in achieving this designation.

The news continues to warn that the virus is coming north, further north than anyone predicted. Should Canadians be worried about the mosquito-borne tropical disease that's tied to neurological defects in babies? Should workers be concerned about the exposure risks? The first suggestions have been that it cannot

make it all the way north to Canada — or can it? For now, experts say no to the risk for Canadians. According to Health Canada and based on the results of its "rapid risk assessment," the overall risk to Canadians is very low. Mosquitoes known to transmit the virus are, as of now, not established in Canada and are not well suited to our climate.

The risk to travellers to affected countries is also reported as low; however, pregnant women and those planning a pregnancy should avoid travel to countries with ongoing Zika virus outbreaks. As of Sept. 1, there had been 251 reported cases of the Zika virus in Canadians living in Canada. Almost all of these — 247 — were from travel, while two were sexually transmitted and two more were from maternal-to-fetal transmission.

People suffering from the virus often try to alleviate symptoms by taking over-the-counter pain and fever medications, resting and drinking plenty of water. Severe disease requiring hospitalization is uncommon.

There are no vaccinations or medications available to prevent

or treat Zika and there are no over-the-counter diagnostic tests for the virus. Health practitioners only can determine whether someone is infected with Zika by conducting blood tests analyzed in advanced health-care laboratories.

As of Sept. 7, 60 countries reported cases of the Zika virus with the virus reaching as far north as Florida, which had 35 locally acquired cases as of Sept. 7, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States.

Jason Tetro, a Canadian microbiologist, told Global News that "mosquitoes are the perfect vector. They normally don't suffer from having the virus in them and they are blood transfusers." The type of mosquito that carries the virus is known to every country in the Americas except for Canada and Chile.

Whether the virus is eventually found in Canada or not, employers need to consider this factor as part of their routine occupational health and safety risk assessment. They need to be prepared to take actions that will avoid infections spreading throughout their workplace.

The U.S. Occupational Safety and

Health Administration (OSHA) and the CDC suggest educating employees about the risks of travel to affected regions, the possible symptoms of Zika, the modes of transmission and proper precautions to avoid infection. Currently, misinformation is prevalent, so to instil confidence in workers, give them the facts so that they can continue to perform their job duties without fear of infection. This is especially crucial for employers who have pregnant employees or employees who have pregnant partners who may have to travel to affected areas. If symptoms develop, seek medical attention promptly. Discuss any possible exposure to mosquitoes or infections spread by mosquitoes with a health-care provider.

According to OSHA and CDC, employers can take the following actions to protect workers from Zika:

- Provide workers with and encourage them to wear clothing that covers their hands, arms, legs and other exposed skin. Consider providing workers with hats with mosquito netting to protect the face and neck.
 - In warm weather, encourage workers to wear lightweight, loose-fitting clothing. This type of clothing protects against sun-exposure and provides a barrier to mosquitoes.
 - Provide workers with adequate water, rest and shade and monitor workers for signs and symptoms of heat illness.
 - Minimize time outdoors in mosquito regions.
 - Use DEET-based insect repellent.
 - Get rid of sources of standing water (such as tires, buckets, cans, bottles and barrels) whenever possible to reduce or eliminate mosquito breeding areas. Train workers about the importance of eliminating areas where mosquitos can breed at the work site.
 - Consider reassigning anyone who indicates she is or may become pregnant, or who is male and has a sexual partner who is or may become pregnant, to indoor tasks to reduce the risk of mosquito bites.
- Zika is a new and, as of yet, a poorly understood occupational health and safety risk factor and there is a need for action, education and communication on the issue.

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