

Mosquitos are no longer simply pesky nuisances that can interfere with outdoor enjoyment. While we are fortunate to reside far from the areas in which Zika virus is most prevalent, several cases have been diagnosed in Connecticut residents who have travelled to these areas. Since recent changes in weather patterns that resulted in a warmer, wetter winter may cause an increase in the mosquito population, having a basic knowledge of this disease is essential.

Although Zika virus started making headlines only within the last couple of years, the virus was first isolated in 1947 in the Zika Forest of Uganda, hence the name. The first human cases were reported in 1952. Since then, the Aedes mosquito that spreads the virus has migrated to Central and South America with devastating results. The female mosquito carries the virus from one person to another. Symptoms include: fever, rash, joint pain, and conjunctivitis and are treated with over-the-counter medications. Laboratory tests can be used to diagnose Zika virus, but at this time, no vaccine is available.

Zika virus presents a significant threat to women of child-bearing age, particularly in the first trimester, as the virus can be transmitted in utero from an infected mother to her unborn baby. It can cause microcephaly, a condition which stunts a baby's head growth and causes severe brain damage, and may lead to miscarriage or stillbirth. Cases of Zika virus have been reported throughout Central & South America, as well as the Caribbean islands. As of January 2017, more than 4,000 cases of microcephaly have been reported in Brazil. For this reason, the Center for Disease Control recommends that women who are pregnant should not travel to any of these locations.

Zika virus can also be transmitted sexually, and it is not known how long the virus can remain active in a man's semen. Therefore, couples are encouraged to have protected sex for six months following a man's return from a country with a high risk for Zika virus.

The U.S. Federal Government has designated over 1 billion dollars toward research for treatment and prevention. The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station currently maintains 91 locations for trapping and testing mosquitoes. Researchers in Brazil are experimenting with the creation of genetically engineered male mosquitoes who pass on a "self-destruct" gene to their offspring, and have reported a reduction in the population of Aedes mosquitoes in their country.

As with most mosquitos, Aedes mosquitoes like a warm, moist environment. You will find them under decks, patio furniture, downspout extenders, and homes that don't have cool air. They have a limited flight range of 300-600 feet. Insecticidal sprays are not very effective unless they contain DEET. General precautions against all mosquitos include removal of standing water near your home, wearing long-sleeve shirts and long pants with socks when outdoors, and using air-conditioning and fans.