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CONTACT:

Amy Higgs

Media Consultant

502.552.2140

amy@write-is-might.com

Zika virus: What summer travelers need to know

Women who are pregnant or trying to conceive still at greatest risk for complications from infection

(LOUISVILLE, KY) – As the weather heats up, mosquitoes come out. These pests bring with them an increased risk of exposure to Zika virus, a mosquito-borne disease that is particularly dangerous to pregnant women, as well as those who are trying to get pregnant. According to the Centers for Disease Control, no cases of local transmission were reported in Kentucky or Indiana in the past year, but residents planning to travel south for summer vacation should continue to take precautions to minimize the threat of infection.

“Pregnant women are still the most vulnerable group when it comes to Zika virus exposure while traveling this summer,” said Miriam Krause, M.D., a reproductive endocrinology and infertility specialist with Louisville-based Fertility and Endocrine Associates. “Prenatal Zika virus infection can occur at any time during pregnancy. It has been linked to significant consequences for the fetus and newborn, including severe birth defects and even death. Women who are currently pregnant or planning to become pregnant in the near future should avoid travel to areas where Zika transmission has been reported.”

For anyone who is diagnosed with the disease, the latest research shows that Zika virus could stay in the body for quite a long time, added Dr. Krause. “The American Society for Reproductive Medicine recommends that both women and men who have been infected by Zika virus should wait at least six months before they attempt to get pregnant. This should minimize their chances of transmitting the virus to their unborn child.”

Facts about Zika

Zika virus can be transmitted in three ways: from mosquito bites; from human to human through intercourse and contact with other bodily fluids; and from mother to fetus during pregnancy. Zika is transmitted by the Aedes species of mosquito, which live in and around households and lay eggs in water-holding containers. They are mainly daytime, indoor biters, which is different than many other mosquitoes that bite at night and outdoors, such as the type that transmits malaria.

The first local mosquito-to-human transmission of Zika virus was reported in Brazil in May 2015, according to the CDC. Since then, a total 5,274 Zika virus cases have been reported in the United States. Of those, 4,973 were reported in travelers returning from affected areas, and 224 cases were reported

as local transmissions in Florida (218) and Texas (6). Visit www.cdc.gov/zika/geo/index.html for the most current information on reported Zika cases.

Preventing infection

There is currently no vaccine available to prevent Zika virus infection, so if travel is necessary, minimizing the risk of mosquito bites is the best form of prevention.

Anyone traveling to affected areas should take the following precautions:

- Use two forms of mosquito repellent — one for skin application and the other to treat clothing
- Wear long-sleeve shirts and long pants
- Stay indoors in air-conditioned and screened-in rooms whenever possible
- Avoid areas where mosquitoes breed, such as standing water, ponds and bird baths

Symptoms, treatment and other precautions

Only about 20 percent of people infected with Zika virus show symptoms, and they are usually mild. The incubation period can be several days to two weeks. Symptoms are non-specific, which can make diagnosis more difficult, and may include fever, rash, joint pains, conjunctivitis, headache, nausea and vomiting. Symptoms can last up to one week and can be treated with supportive medication. There is no medicine specifically designed to treat Zika virus.

Men and women with possible exposure to Zika virus but without clinical illness should be tested for Zika immediately, and, if negative, retested for the disease eight weeks later to rule out any infection. Zika virus may live in sperm for up to six months after exposure, so couples should wait at least that long after traveling to affected areas before attempting to get pregnant.

For more information and Zika virus and pregnancy, or to schedule an interview with Dr. Krause, contact Amy Higgs, media consultant, at 502.552.2140.

About Fertility and Endocrine Associates

Fertility and Endocrine Associates is a women's health practice offering comprehensive and advanced reproductive and fertility services. With specialists who are board certified in both obstetrics and gynecology and reproductive endocrinology and infertility, the Louisville-based physicians practice is dedicated to providing compassionate care for women and their partners. Fertility services include comprehensive testing and analysis, in vitro fertilization, intrauterine insemination, ovulation induction, anonymous egg and embryo donor programs, egg and sperm cryopreservation, preimplantation genetic diagnosis and intra-cytoplasmic sperm injections. The practice also has expertise in treatments for pelvic pain, recurrent pregnancy loss, polycystic ovary syndrome, endometriosis and uterine fibroids. For more information about the practice and its team of specialists, visit ivfkentucky.com.

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