**Zika Virus Awareness**

Although researchers still have a lot to discover about Zika, they know that the major source of transmission is through the bite of certain species of infected Aedes mosquitoes, which lay their eggs in containers of standing water around the home, rather than in wetland areas. As of March 31, there were eight confirmed cases of Zika virus in Maryland—all associated with travel to areas where the disease has been actively transmitted. The disease has not been transmitted locally by mosquitoes; however, that may change as the Aedes mosquitoes become active in warmer weather, usually around the beginning of May in Maryland. If a mosquito takes a blood meal from a recent traveler who has Zika virus circulating in his or her blood, the mosquito can become infected and transmit the virus when it takes another blood meal.

**About Zika Virus**

Most people infected with the Zika virus do not know it, as symptoms are relatively mild. The most common symptoms are fever, rash, joint pain, and conjunctivitis (pink eye). However, the virus poses a significant threat to pregnant women because it has been linked to birth defects, including a condition known as [microcephaly](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/microcephaly.html). The virus may also be linked to a rare neurologic disorder, Guillain-Barre syndrome.

The incubation period (the time from exposure to symptoms) for Zika virus disease is not known, but is likely a few days to a week. The illness is usually mild with symptoms lasting for several days to a week after being bitten by an infected mosquito. Zika virus usually remains in the blood of an infected person for about a week but it can be found longer in some people. Once a person has been infected, he or she is likely to be protected from future infections. There is no vaccine to prevent or treat the disease at this time.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend residents see a health care provider if they show symptoms within two weeks of possible exposure to Zika virus, especially if they have traveled to a [region where the virus is active](http://www.cdc.gov/zika/geo/active-countries.html) – areas in the Caribbean, South America, and Central America – or have had [sexual contact](http://www.cdc.gov/zika/pregnancy/protect-yourself.html) with someone who has traveled to those regions. Health and Mental Hygiene urges people who believe they are at risk for contracting Zika to alert their health care provider.

**Prevention**

The best way to avoid the Zika virus is to prevent mosquito bites. And the best way to avoid bites is to eliminate areas where these mosquitoes lay their eggs. These areas are called “breeding sites.”

“We anticipate a heightened risk for local transmission of Zika virus as local Aedes mosquitoes become active in May,” said Agriculture Secretary Joe Bartenfelder. “The best way to prevent Zika virus is to prevent mosquito bites. This is why it is critical for all Marylanders to survey their property for potential mosquito breeding areas.”

Aedes mosquitoes breed in containers of standing water. Items like lawn furniture, corrugated drain pipes, flower pots, children’s toys and a variety of common household items can quickly become mosquito breeding grounds. It is vital that all Marylanders make an effort to survey their property now and drain or eliminate anything where water can pool. For instance, store items that hold water inside or upside down. The Department of Agriculture has posted a comprehensive list of tips to eliminate breeding sites on its website at <http://mda.maryland.gov/plants-pests/Pages/Zika.aspx>

Another important part of Zika virus prevention is avoiding mosquito bites and removing mosquito breeding areas. The department suggests that residents take precautions to minimize their exposure to mosquito bites. These measures include:

* Wear long, loose-fitting, light-colored clothing
* Apply insect repellents according to product labels
* Avoid mosquito-infested areas during prime periods of activity (early and late in the day and at night in well-lit areas)
* Install, inspect, and repair window and door screens in homes and stables

For more tips on eliminating mosquito breeding areas, avoiding mosquito bites, as well as general information on Aedes mosquitoes, visit the [**Department of Agriculture’s Zika website**](http://mda.maryland.gov/plants-pests/Pages/Zika.aspx).