Zika virus Fact sheet
Updated February 2016

Key facts
• Zika virus disease is caused by a virus transmitted by Aedes mosquitoes.
• People with Zika virus disease usually have symptoms that can include mild fever, skin rashes, conjunctivitis, muscle and joint pain, malaise or headache. These symptoms normally last for 2-7 days.
• There is no specific treatment or vaccine currently available.
• The best form of prevention is protection against mosquito bites.

How is Zika virus transmitted?
Zika virus is transmitted to people through the bite of an infected Aedes mosquito. This is the same mosquito that transmits dengue and chikungunya. Recently other, though less common, modes of transmission have been observed.

Who is at risk of Zika infection?
Anyone not previously exposed to the virus and who lives in an area where the mosquito is present, and where imported or local cases have been reported, may be infected. Since the Aedes mosquito is found throughout the Region (except in continental Chile and Canada), it is likely that outbreaks will occur in other countries that have not yet reported any cases.

Which is the difference between Zika, dengue, and chikungunya?
All these diseases present similar symptoms, but certain symptoms suggest one disease or another:
Dengue usually presents with higher fever and more severe muscle pain. There can be complications when the fever breaks: attention should be paid to warning signs such as bleeding.

Chikungunya presents with higher fever and more intense joint pain, affecting the hands, feet, knees, and back. It can disable people, bending them over so that they cannot walk or perform simple actions such as opening a water bottle.

Zika does not have clearly characteristic features, but most patients have skin rashes and some have conjunctivitis.

What is the threat to children from the Zika virus?
As the Zika virus spreads, the threat to unborn children is very real. In Brazil, there are about 4,000 suspected cases of microcephaly, a neurological disorder that results in babies born with abnormally small heads. Zika has spread to 26 Latin American and Caribbean countries, and the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared a global public health emergency.
PREVENTION

What is the most powerful weapon against Zika?
Knowledge — in conjunction with mosquito-control measures — is our most powerful asset in halting the spread of the disease and protecting pregnant women. Says Dr. Heather Papowitz, UNICEF’s senior advisor for health emergencies, “We need to act fast to provide women and pregnant mothers with the information they need. And we need to engage with communities on how to stop the mosquito (Vector Control) that is carrying and transmitting this virus.”

What measures should be taken to prevent Zika virus infection?
Prevention involves reducing mosquito populations and avoiding bites, which occur mainly during the day. Eliminating and controlling Aedes aegypti mosquito breeding sites reduces the chances that Zika, chikungunya, and dengue will be transmitted. An integrated response is required, involving action in several areas, including health, education, and the environment.

To eliminate and control the mosquito, it is recommended to:

- Avoid allowing standing water in outdoor containers (flower pots, bottles, and containers that collect water) so that they do not become mosquito breeding sites.
- Cover domestic water tanks so that mosquitoes cannot get in.
- Avoid accumulating garbage: Put it in closed plastic bags and keep it in closed containers.
- Unblock drains that could accumulate standing water.
- Use screens and mosquito nets in windows and doors to reduce contact between mosquitoes and people.

To prevent mosquito bites, it is recommended that people who live in areas where there are cases of the disease, as well as travelers and, especially, pregnant women should:

- Cover exposed skin with long-sleeved shirts, trousers, and hats
- Use repellents recommended by the health authorities (and apply them as indicated on the label)
- During the day, sleep under mosquito nets.

People with symptoms of Zika, dengue, or chikungunya should visit a health center.

Potential complications of Zika virus disease
During large outbreaks in French Polynesia and Brazil in 2013 and 2015 respectively, national health authorities reported potential neurological and auto-immune complications of Zika virus disease. Recently in Brazil, local health authorities have observed an increase in Guillain-Barré syndrome which coincided with Zika virus infections in the general public, as well as an increase in babies born with microcephaly in northeast Brazil. Agencies investigating the Zika outbreaks are finding an increasing body of evidence about the link between Zika virus and microcephaly. However, more investigation is needed to better understand the relationship between microcephaly in babies and the Zika virus. Other potential causes are also being investigated.