Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Sexually Transmission of Zika Virus Infection: What We Know and What We Don’t Know

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2016 STD Conference
September 21, 2016
Transmission of Zika virus

Documented

- Bite of an *Aedes aegypti* or *Ae. albopictus* mosquito
- Intrauterine and perinatal transmission
- Sexual transmission from infected men and women
- Laboratory exposure

Plausible

- Blood transfusion/tissue transplantation
- Breast milk
Zika Symptoms and Outcomes

Most infections are asymptomatic or mild

Symptoms develop 2-7 days after exposure
- Fever, rash, arthralgia, or conjunctivitis
- Last several days to a week

Severe and fatalities rare
- Demyelinating syndromes (GBS)

Infection appears to confer immunity
Populations of Greatest Concern

Pregnant women
- Microcephaly and other severe fetal brain defects

Women of reproductive age (age 15-44 years)
- 37% of pregnancies in the U.S. are unplanned

After recovery from infection, there appears to be no risk to future pregnancies

Sexual Transmission of Zika

Suggested by at least two reports prior to current outbreak in the Americas

- Possible sexual transmission reported from U.S. in 2008\(^1\)
- Recovery of Zika by culture and detection by rRT-PCR in semen of symptomatically infected Tahitian man in 2013\(^2\)
- Both men reported hematospermia

In early 2016, multiple case reports of sexually transmitted infections

- From travelers returning from areas with active Zika transmission to sex partners that had not traveled

Now reported from at least 11 countries including United States

### How Can Zika Be Transmitted Sexually?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What We Know</th>
<th>What We Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Zika can be sexually transmitted by men to their male or female sex partners</td>
<td>▪ If Zika can be transmitted through sexual contact between two women.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Zika can also be transmitted by women to their male sex partners (1 case)</td>
<td>▪ If Zika can be transmitted through cunnilingus.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Zika can be transmitted through vaginal and anal sex, and possibly fellatio</td>
<td>▪ If per-act transmission risks differ (e.g., anal vs. vaginal receptive sex)</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Asymptomatic men can transmit Zika sexually</td>
<td>▪ If symptomatically infected persons are more likely to transmit than asymptomatically infected persons (i.e., do symptoms correlated with infectiousness?)</td>
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</table>
When and in What Body Fluids Can Zika be Detected?

Median serum incubation period 6 days$^1$
- 95% by 10-18 days

Virus cultured and detected by RT-PCR
- Serum
- Whole blood
- Urine
- Saliva
- Genital fluids (semen, cervicovaginal secretions)

Zika Virus in Semen and Risk of Sexual Transmission

Symptom Onset

(Latest times, days after symptom onset)

Culture (“infectious virus”): 24 days

Observed sexual transmission: 32-41 days

rRT-PCR positive (“viral RNA”): 188+ days

Prolonged Detection of Zika Viral RNA in Semen

A. Duration of symptoms and ZIKV RNA load in the patient’s plasma, urine, saliva and semen samples (by real-time RT-PCR)

1. Barzon, 2016, Euro Surveill; 21(32);pi=30316 11-August-2016
Zika Virus in Semen and Risk of Sexual Transmission

What does detection of Zika viral RNA mean in terms of infection risk?

- One other case of up to 181 days; outliers?
- Documented 4 cases with negative follow-up at 56-99 days
- All attempts to culture virus from late samples have been unsuccessful
### How Much of a Risk Does Zika in Semen Pose?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What We Know</th>
<th>What We Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Zika has not been cultured from semen &gt; 30 days after illness onset.</td>
<td>▪ What is the incidence of Zika viremia in semen (both infected men with and without symptoms)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Of the few sexually transmitted infections observed, most have occurred &lt; 60 days after illness onset.</td>
<td>▪ How long can virus capable of transmitting infection remain in semen?</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Zika viral RNA has been persistently detected in semen &gt; 180 days after illness onset.</td>
<td>▪ Where is virus replicating?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ What is the pattern of viremia in semen (steady decline or intermittent)?</td>
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<td>▪ Can anything be done to speed resolution of semen viremia?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Zika Virus in Cervicovaginal Secretions

Symptom Onset

(Latest times, days after symptom onset)

Culture (“infectious virus”): unknown

Observed sexual transmission: 0 days

rRT-PCR positive (“viral RNA”)  
• Vaginal and endocervical swabs: 3 days
• Cervical mucous: 11+ days
• Three rhesus macaque vaginal swabs

Rhesus macaque model

## What Risk is Posed by Zika in Cervicovaginal Fluids?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What We Know</th>
<th>What We Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ There is a paucity of data</td>
<td>▪ What is the incidence of Zika viremia in cervicovaginal secretions (both infected men with and without symptoms)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• One case report with samples</td>
<td>▪ How long can virus capable of transmitting infection remain in cervicovaginal secretions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Single female→ male transmission(^1)</td>
<td>▪ What is the source of virus?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Exposure near symptom onset</td>
<td>▪ What is the pattern of viremia (steady decline or intermittent)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Menses imminent</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Male uncircumcised</td>
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ZIKA AND SEX: HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND YOUR LOVED ONES, IF YOU OR YOUR PARTNER HAVE BEEN IN AN AREA WITH ZIKA

IF YOU ARE:

Pregnant

WHAT TO DO:
Use condoms* or do not have sex

FOR HOW LONG:
For the entire pregnancy

WHY:
To prevent infection in the mother and birth defects in the baby

Planning to get pregnant

WHAT TO DO:
Wait to get pregnant. Use condoms* or do not have sex

FOR HOW LONG:
If traveler is male:
And has Zika illness/symptoms, at least 6 months after symptoms started
And has no Zika illness/symptoms, at least 8 weeks after return from travel
If traveler is female:
And has Zika illness/symptoms, at least 8 weeks after symptoms started
And has no Zika illness/symptoms, at least 8 weeks after return from travel

WHY:
To prevent infection in the mother and birth defects in the baby

Not planning or able to get pregnant

WHAT TO DO:
Consider using condoms or not having sex

FOR HOW LONG:
If traveler is male:
And has Zika illness/symptoms, at least 6 months after symptoms started
And has no Zika illness/symptoms, at least 8 weeks after return from travel
If traveler is female:
And has Zika illness/symptoms, at least 8 weeks after symptoms started
And has no Zika illness/symptoms, at least 8 weeks after return from travel

WHY:
To prevent getting Zika

*For this algorithm, condoms refer to all barriers that prevent infection during sex including male and female condoms and dental dams. Sex is defined as vaginal, anal, or oral sex and the sharing of sex toys.
ZIKA AND SEX: HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND YOUR LOVED ONES, IF YOU OR YOUR PARTNER LIVE IN AN AREA WITH ZIKA

IF YOU ARE: Pregnant
WHAT TO DO: Use condoms* or do not have sex
FOR HOW LONG: For the entire pregnancy
WHY: To prevent infection in the mother and birth defects in the baby

IF YOU ARE: Planning to get pregnant
WHAT TO DO: Talk to a healthcare provider to discuss and plan the pregnancy
FOR HOW LONG: As long as there is Zika in the area
WHY: To prevent infection in the mother and birth defects in the baby

IF YOU ARE: Not planning or able to get pregnant
WHAT TO DO: Consider using condoms or not having sex
FOR HOW LONG: As long as there is Zika in the area
WHY: To prevent getting Zika

*For this algorithm, condoms refer to all barriers that prevent infection during sex including male and female condoms and dental dams. Sex is defined as vaginal, anal, or oral sex and the sharing of sex toys.
Testing

Recommended to establish diagnosis of infection

- Patient with fever, rash, arthralgia, or conjunctivitis and either:
  - Onset during or within 2 weeks of travel to an area with active transmission
  - Epidemiologic link to laboratory-confirmed case through vertical transmission, sexual contact, or association in time and place

- Offer testing to all asymptomatic pregnant women with a history of either:
  - Travel to or residency in an area with active transmission during pregnancy
  - Sexual contact with a potentially infected person (e.g., recently returned traveler or person living in an area with ongoing transmission), whether she or her sex partner have had or develop any symptoms of illness
Testing

Not recommended to establish absence of infection

Falsely negative results might be *falsely reassuring* that there is no risk of sexual and lead to inadvertent sexual exposure of fetus to Zika

- Serum RT-PCR: Zika viral RNA has been detected in semen when no longer detectable in serum and urine (utility of whole blood under consideration)
- Serum IgM: testing window is limited and not well defined (estimated to be positive around 2-12 weeks after infection)
- Whole blood RT-PCR: promising but not yet available
- Semen testing: all RT-PCR and culture are done under research protocols only
CDC Studies of Zika Virus in Semen and Other Body Fluids

U.S. study of returned male travelers diagnosed with Zika
- Semen and urine
- Every 2 weeks up to 6 months after onset
- Self-collection, self-mailer
- Project Director: Alison Hinckley, cue0@cdc.gov/970-221-6400

Puerto Rico study of men and women diagnosed with Zika (ZiPer)
- Blood, saliva, urine, semen, and vaginal swabs
- Symptomatic and asymptomatic men and women
- Specimens weekly for 4 weeks then biweekly until negative twice
- Recruiting 350 patients with up to 5 household contacts each
- Email ZIPER@cdc.gov
What Else Do We Know and Not Know?

What is the contribution of sexual transmission to the burden of Zika infections?
- Difficult to discern where both exposures are occurring simultaneously.

Can kissing transmit Zika?
- Unlikely given the disproportionate male:female ratio of sexually transmitted infections (predominately transmitted from men, predominately symptomatic)

Is Zika spreading unobserved through the population through sex?
- Unlikely given that it is a time-limited infection, unlike traditional STDs that may continue to be transmitted for long periods until diagnosed and treated

Have there been any sexual transmitted infections of pregnant women?
- Yes and CDC is monitoring the outcomes of all pregnant women diagnosed
Summary

Zika may be first flavivirus observed to be transmitted through sex

We have learned a lot about sexual transmission of Zika but knowledge gaps remain, especially to inform prevention recommendations

Key questions include:

- Correlation of infectiousness with viral RNA titers
- Contribution of sexual transmission to burden of Zika virus infections
- Biology of Zika infection in human male and female genitourinary tract

Balancing principles of precaution and proportionality is a challenge
CDC Resources and Materials

- Interim Guidelines – [http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/65/wr/mm6529e2.htm?s_cid=mm6529e2_e](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/65/wr/mm6529e2.htm?s_cid=mm6529e2_e)
Thank you!

For more information, contact CDC
1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636)

The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.