

Cairo, 31 January 2016 -- As the Zika virus outbreak continues to spread reaching 24 countries in the Americas (as of 27 January), WHO's Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Dr Ala Alwan is calling on governments to work together to keep the Region protected.

"Zika virus is spread by the *Aedes* mosquito, the same type of mosquito that transmits dengue, yellow fever and chikungunya," says Dr Ala Alwan. "No cases of the virus have been reported so far in this Region, but this type of mosquito exists in several countries here, so it is essential that government leaders take steps to prevent the virus from spreading if travellers returning from affected countries are infected with the virus."

Most people with the disease experience mild fever, skin rash and conjunctivitis, also known as pink eye, for up to a week. But, for the first time, in conjunction with the recent outbreak there has been a steep increase in births of babies with abnormally small heads and neurological syndromes. It is not yet proven with certainty that the virus is causing the birth defects, but evidence so far suggests strongly that there is a link and further investigations are underway.

Because no specific treatment or vaccine is currently available, the best form of prevention is protection against mosquito bites. To protect people living in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, Dr Alwan urges all countries to:

- enhance surveillance for early detection of Zika virus infection, particularly among travellers returning from countries where the virus is currently circulating;
- be vigilant for any increase in the number of babies recently born with birth defects or neurological syndromes, where this is not a clear medical cause;
- bolster surveillance in countries where the *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes are present, to detect high density of mosquito populations;

- scale up activities to reduce the source of mosquito populations, especially breeding sites like standing water, through indoor spraying and engage communities;
- raise awareness among people living in high-risk countries where dengue, chikungunya and yellow fever are present, emphasizing personal protection measures to prevent mosquito bites, especially during day time when these types of mosquitoes tend to bite.

People can protect themselves and their loved ones by using insect repellent, wearing clothes that cover as much of the body as possible, using physical barriers such as screens, closed

doors and windows, and emptying any containers that hold standing water, because they often serve as breeding sites for these mosquitoes.

As agreed by international law, all countries must work together by reporting to WHO any suspected case of the disease so necessary actions can be taken to help prevent spread of the virus.

WHO is working globally to support countries where the disease has been detected, to help understand the potential link between the virus and birth defects, to reduce the international spread of the disease and to help expedite the development of a vaccine or treatment for Zika virus disease.

At this point in time WHO does not recommend any restrictions on travel or trade but this decision will be reviewed regularly. Because the situation varies by country, WHO recommends that travellers also consult the relevant national health advice before travelling to any affected country.

Related link

[WHO to convene an IHR Emergency Committee on Zika virus and observed increase in neurological disorders and neonatal malformations](#)

For additional information, please contact:

Rana Sidani
Senior Communication Officer
WHO Regional Office in Egypt
Direct: +20 2 22765552
Mobile: +20 1099756506
E-mail: sidanir@who.int

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