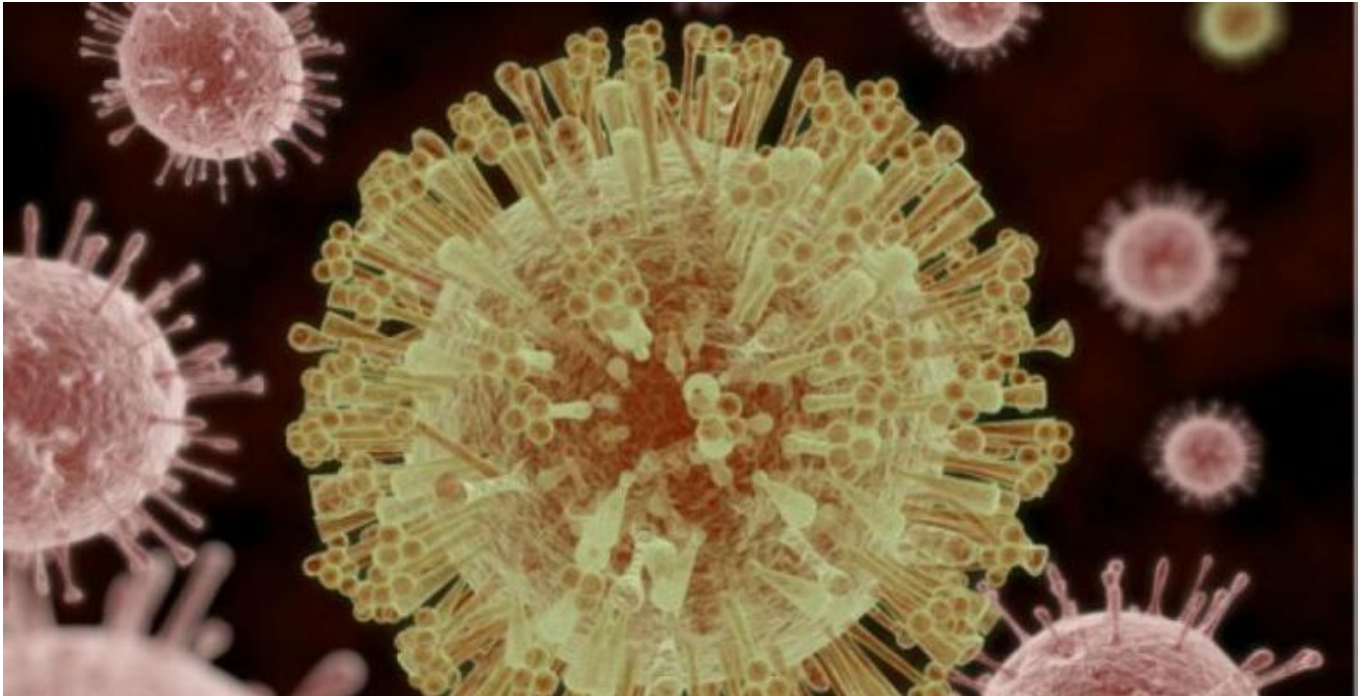

American Countries Warn Pregnant Women over the Zika Virus

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Since November, the virus has spread rapidly and its presence has been confirmed in Brazil, Barbados, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, French Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Martinique, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Puerto Rico, San Martin, Surinam, Venezuela and now also the U.S., where at least two pregnant women have tested positive for Zika.

Faced with this rapid spread, new action is now focusing on pregnant women as, though not usually fatal, the virus has been linked with increased reports of microcephaly, a deformity in which the baby is born with the skull smaller than normal, particularly in Brazil, where more than 3,500 cases of this anomaly are suspected to be a result of Zika.

The situation has prompted governments such as Colombia and Jamaica to recommend avoiding pregnancies, following the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO) to step up prevention against the increase in birth defects in areas where the virus circulates.

"In consideration of the phase in which the existing Zika epidemic is and the risks involved, it is recommended to all couples of the country to not get pregnant during this phase, which can last until July 2016," according to a notice from the Health Ministry of Colombia, where 11,712 cases of Zika have been reported, of which 297 are women in pregnancy.

However, the Colombian government denied on Wednesday the presence of a first case of microcephaly linked to the virus as indicated by Colombian senator and Doctor Jorge Ivan Ospina.

Colombia had also announced the launch of a study to determine if there is a relationship between Zika and cases of microcephaly in the country, where between 2009-2015 some 840 children were treated with this deformity.

Likewise, the Jamaican government, where no cases have been recorded, recommended to female Jamaicans on

Wednesday to delay their pregnancies “for the next 6-12 months” because of the growing threat of the virus.

“The Zika virus is inching closer and closer to Jamaica as several of our Caribbean neighbors have reported cases. Women are therefore being advised to delay pregnancy if possible,” said Health Minister Horace Dalley.

The Dominican government, which stepped up the surveillance at border points, ports, airports and cruises after confirmation of the virus being present in Haiti, said that it considers including the recommendation to avoid pregnancy in its virus prevention protocol.

In the U.S., the state of Florida confirmed three cases, but no pregnant women, with the virus on Wednesday. Two of the affected travelled to Colombia in December and the other visited Venezuela. Florida issued a travel advisory in which it recommends pregnant women or those planning to become pregnant should avoid travelling to the 14 countries in Latin America in which Zika circulates.

“Until more is known, and out of an abundance of caution, CDC recommends special precautions for pregnant women and women trying to become pregnant,” noted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the U.S.

At present Brazil, with 3,530 reported cases, is the country with the highest number of cases of microcephaly, suspected to have been caused by the virus.

Therefore, the government launched an intense mobilization to combat “*Aedes aegypti*” mosquito that transmits dengue, Chikungunya and Zika, in addition to launching an investigation into the death of 38 babies allegedly linked to the virus.

“This is a dramatic situation, without precedent. New cases accrue daily, but we are not managing to connect the dots,” told Artur Timerman, president of the Brazilian Society for Dengue and Arbovirus, who said that the Government made a mistake by not taking action against the virus earlier, according to the Spanish newspaper El Pais.

“Pregnant women should be protected at all times. Until there are studies that say at which stage of pregnancy is there a possibility to acquire Zika, we will not lower our guard and continue alerting,” said Ana Rius Armendariz, Secretary of Health of Puerto Rico, where one person has been diagnosed with the virus.

So far, there is no consolidated figures of those infected with Zika on the continent, as in some countries it is not mandatory to notify the cases, although Colombia reports the highest number with 11,714 cases.

The virus, which can cause fever, red eyes without secretion and without irritation, rash and, less frequently, muscle and joint pain, was identified for the first time in 1947 in the forests of Zika in Uganda (Africa) and was detected in Latin America in 2014 by Chilean authorities, who confirmed the first case on Easter Island.