

Zika and Tourism

The Caribbean is the one of the most tourism dependent regions in the world, thus travel related diseases like Zika have the huge potential to negatively affect the economies and tourism destination reputation of Caribbean countries. In fact, according to our partners, the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) and Caribbean Hotel and Tourism association (CHTA), there are already reports of travel cancellations in the Caribbean due Zika.

While Tourism related travel is the Caribbean's major economic earner, it also contributes to disease spread. The Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) indicated a record 26.3 million stay over tourists and 24.5M cruise ship arrivals in 2014, a 5.3 percent rise over 2013, and this trend continued in 2015. These visitors spent US\$29.2 billion, another record for Caribbean tourism. The US continues to be the region's primary market, with nearly 13 million Americans, just under half of the total arrivals to the region.

However, high and increasing levels of visitor arrivals increase the potential risk for visitors and locals transmitting or acquiring diseases from each other. This was typified by SARs in 2000, the H1N1 pandemic of 2009, Chikungunya in 2013 and now Zika. Thus, heightened concern, alerts and specific measures for travelers have resulted from regional and international health agencies like CARPHA, PAHO, WHO and CDC.

The consequences of reduced tourist numbers for the millions of people in the Caribbean whose livelihoods depend on the sector can be serious, contributing to adverse economic and social burden on Caribbean economies. As travel increases, the number of Zika cases among travelers will likely increase and the potential negative impact on Caribbean tourism –dependent economies will likely escalate.

In May 2015, the first local transmission of Zika virus was reported in South America. To date, no locally transmitted Zika cases have been reported in continental United States, but cases have been reported in returning travelers. Local spread of the virus in the US can stem from imported cases as *Aedes* vectors are present in some states.

Consequently, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) through their Traveler Health branch, has been urging all travelers visiting Latin American and the Caribbean countries where Zika virus circulation has been confirmed, to take extra precautions against mosquito bites to avoid contracting the virus.

The CDC's Travel notices, designed to inform travelers and clinicians about current health issues related to specific destinations, especially those posing a risk to the US, can be of 3 types

- Level 1: Watch level : Practice Usual precautions
- Level 2: Alert level: Practice Enhanced Precautions
- Level 3 Avoid Non Essential Travel

On Friday January 22, CDC upgraded the warning for selected countries in Latin America and the Caribbean where locally acquired cases were confirmed to a Level 2 travel notice. This notification recommends

special precautions for pregnant women, who are advised to consider postponing travel, and for women of childbearing age who are planning to become pregnant, who are advised to consult with their doctor before traveling, due to the probable association between Zika virus infection in pregnancy and adverse fetal outcomes. All travelers are urged to, as usual, strictly adhere to mosquito bite precautions.

So how is CARPHA addressing the impact of Zika on tourism?

CARPHA, through its integrated regional Tourism and Health program, and in collaboration with its partners, CTO and CHTA, is taking a holistic aggressive approach to travel-related Zika (and other mosquito borne infections) through prevention and control that includes the following:

- Updated guidelines for Zika prevention in travelers and in hotels/guesthouses, for circulation in hotels and other tourism stay-over lodgings by CHTA and in cruise ships by CLIA (Cruise Line International Agency).
- An aggressive public awareness campaign for the tourism industry, that includes sharing facts with the media, travelers and the public
- Agreement with CTO and CHTA to embark on a joint enhanced vector control program in hotels . This will include the sharing of best practices with the industry (via various means including webinars)
- Joint and ongoing discussions with CDC Traveler’s Health and other international agencies like PAHO, PHAC and PHE , UK re travel advisories, Zika prevention, its risk and impact on tourism
- Teleconferences/Webinars with hotel, cruise ship industry and Ministries of Health re Zika prevention in hotels and cruise ships, surveillance guidelines and joint public health action if necessary
- Using the CaTHNET forum for rapid dissemination of information and outbreak prevention and control. CaTHNet, established by CARPHA in December 2015, is a network of public health agencies designed to rapidly share relevant information on issues of public health concern to travelers visiting the Caribbean region, to promote global health security. Current agencies on this network include the CDC, PHE and PHAC

So in conclusion, we would like to send a message to travelers coming to the Caribbean, “Don’t let the mosquitos ruin your travel”! While, there is no vaccine to prevent contracting Zika or medicine to treat Zika, travelers can protect themselves against Zika and other mosquito borne infections like chikungunya and dengue by preventing mosquito bites. We thus urge travelers to:

- Use insect repellent
- Stay and sleep in screened /air conditioning rooms (hotels/lodgings)
- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants

In the same vein, we would like to send a message to hotels and guesthouses, to enhance measures to avoid mosquito breeding in your compound and surroundings including

- Avoid storing water in outdoor containers that can collect water and become breeding sites.
- Cover water tanks or reservoirs so that mosquitoes do not get in.
- Uncover/unblock gutters and drains to release stagnant water.
- Install mosquito screening on windows and doors
- Consider supplying guests with bed nets in areas where the sleeping quarters are
- Consider placing having insect repellents in every room, or having them available for purchase
- Provide staff and guests with information