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Zika Virus and School Travel

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Debra P. Wilson

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As schools prepare for spring break and other second-semester trips, the virus Zika has caught the attention of many parents and administrators, especially the impact it's had in parts of Central and South America. As the virus spreads farther north, into the Caribbean and potentially the southern United States, many schools are grappling with how to manage school trips planned for countries where students and chaperones may be exposed to the virus.

Zika: The Virus

Zika is a virus spread largely by mosquitos. At this time, there is reason to believe that the virus can also be transmitted sexually by an infected person. The virus itself is at a fairly low warning level for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – level two, indicating the CDC requests that people “used enhanced precautions.” To detect the virus, the standard symptoms are fever, rash, joint pain, and conjunctivitis. The symptoms should last no longer than a couple of days or a week. The virus itself remains in the blood of the infected person for about a week, sometimes longer. However, at this time the virus has been linked to birth defects in children born to women exposed to the virus during pregnancy. Schools should note that the Zika virus is actually not all that new; it has been around since the 1940s.

One very serious outstanding question about the Zika virus is whether it is causing a potential uptick in [Guillain Barre Syndrome](#) in Brazil. While the standard form of the Zika virus is generally fairly mild and people are rarely hospitalized for it, Guillain Barre Syndrome is a rare disorder “where a person’s own immune system damages the nerve cells, causing muscle weakness and sometimes, paralysis.”[1] Most people recover fully from Guillain Barre Syndrome, although some have permanent damage and in rare cases people have died.

What Should Schools Be Doing?

At this time, many schools seem to be moving forward with their trips to areas that may result in exposure to the Zika virus, while keeping an eye on any escalations in the status of the CDC warning. Schools continue to monitor the spread of the Zika virus and ongoing reports regarding its severity and possible side effects. The CDC has created a [general information page that provides background information and prevention steps, as well as questions and answers and updates](#) on where the virus has spread. Schools with trips travelling toward these locations should take several initial steps.

1. Thoroughly review CDC, WHO and other information available on the Zika virus, as well as its potential side effects.
2. Determine the date by which your school or individuals can cancel travel plans. Many airlines have been providing either refunds or flight changes with no or limited fees depending on the circumstances.
3. Make an initial decision about whether the trip will go forward, if individual cancellations will be allowed to the extent possible, and what the financial ramifications of these decisions will be. Communicate any cancellation decisions as soon as you can. Prepare additional materials for trips moving forward as scheduled, now or in the future.
4. Make any decisions about potential changes to your itinerary that may lessen the potential exposure to the virus.
5. If the trip is going, provide parents, staff, and students with an overview of the risks associated with travel to locales where the Zika virus either is or is anticipated to be at the time of your school's trip. This information should be provided both orally and through electronic or other communications if possible, including links to or

copies of the CDC information.

6. Provide parents, staff, and students with an overview of needed clothes, insect repellent, mosquito netting, and other preventative measures that those traveling should take with them. Again, this information can be provided in writing, as well as verbally, to the extent feasible. Ensure that students are aware of the steps they should be taking on their own behalf while on the trip.
7. In communicating with parents, make sure they understand that there are no foolproof prevention measures available other than not attending the trip.
8. If the trip is going ahead, work with legal counsel to ensure that releases and waivers are sufficient to address this new threat. In some states this may include that releases specifically include information about the Zika virus as needed.
9. Work with staff and other chaperones to ensure the necessary preventative steps are carried out for the trip in question.
10. Develop crisis plans consistent with other trip crisis plans to address potential severe reactions to the Zika virus, including the unlikely event that a student or chaperone could contract Guillain Barre Syndrome while on the trip.

What Next?

Unfortunately, viruses both old and new continue to spread around the world. As part of regular trip preparation, schools should continue to monitor potential health and safety issues for all of the regions students are exploring. [For an overview of practices and considerations, see this report](#) from NAIS and United Educators. At the same time, school trips are meant to be a time of growth and exploration and exposure to some risks are part of that experience. Schools will need to continue to exercise their own judgment about what is appropriate for their own school culture and the risks that their particular trips involve.

[1] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Zika Disease Questions and Answers](#), February 10, 2016.

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