



## The Zika Virus and Sexual Risk Avoidance Education:

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The emerging threat of the sexually transmitted Zika virus underscores the value of Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) education for sexual restraint and self-regulation. The Zika virus was first discovered in Uganda in 1947 and was not believed to pose any major health risk at the time. Fast forward to 2016 where we now know that the potentially devastating mosquito-borne virus can be sexually transmitted. The Zika virus is known to cause severe birth defects, most notably microcephaly, and the alarm is ringing on a global scale. Regions most heavily affected are Latin America and the Caribbean, but that is changing rapidly as the CDC reported that as of May, 2016, 279 pregnant women in the United States and the US territories have tested positive for Zika. The World Health Organization estimates there could be up to 4 million cases of Zika in the Americas in the next year.<sup>1</sup>

The CDC also reports there are 10 confirmed cases of sexually transmitted Zika in the United States and that “sexual transmission may be a more likely means of transmission for Zika virus than previously considered.”<sup>2</sup> Together with this revelation from the CDC comes guidance for prevention based on what we know and what we don’t know. For instance, the CDC reports the following information and advice:<sup>3</sup>

- “A man with Zika virus can pass it to his female or male sexual partners.
- Zika virus can stay in semen longer than in blood, but we don’t know exactly how long Zika stays in semen.
- We don’t know if a woman with Zika can pass the virus to her sexual partners.
- We don’t know if Zika can be passed through vaginal fluids during vaginal or oral (mouth to vaginal) sex.
- We don’t know if Zika can be passed through saliva during deep, open-mouth kissing.
- If the male partner has been diagnosed with Zika or has (or had) symptoms, the couple should consider using condoms or not having sex for at least 6 months after symptoms begin.

- Because Zika can cause birth defects, couples should take steps to prevent infection during the pregnancy. Couples should use a condom every time they have sex or not have sex during the pregnancy.”

Not unlike the discovery of the HIV virus in the 1980’s, the new awareness of a potentially devastating virus to a child in the womb requires the strongest possible public health campaign to eliminate risk. Our current medical uncertainty regarding modes of sexual transmission should tip the scales of Zika public health prevention-messaging toward encouraging behaviors that eliminate risks as the first and most persuasive message. It is important that a strong, unambiguous message be given to both adults and teens regarding the elimination of risk without implying that abstaining from sex and using a condom are equally protective. Sexual risk avoidance is a particularly important message our young athletes need as they head off to the 2016 Olympics in Brazil, a region with a high risk for Zika infection.

Ascend hopes that as Congress considers funding to meet the challenge of the Zika virus, strong consideration will be given to the sexual risk avoidance approach. As the CDC’s tagline states, “Saving lives, Protecting People” must be our first and highest call. A strong message of sexual risk avoidance can help to meet that call.

<sup>1</sup>US National Library of Medicine. (2016, May 25) Zika Virus. Bethesda, MD: NIH. Accessed on May 30, 2016 at [https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/news/fullstory\\_157505.html](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/news/fullstory_157505.html)

<sup>2</sup>CDC Health Alert Network. (2016, Feb. 23) Update: Interim Guidelines for Prevention of Sexual Transmission of Zika Virus — United States, 2016 . Atlanta: Author. Accessed May 30, 2016 at <http://emergency.cdc.gov/han/han00388.asp>

<sup>3</sup>CDC (2016, May 23). Zika and Sexual Transmission. Atlanta: Author. Accessed on May 30 2016 at <http://www.cdc.gov/zika/transmission/sexual-transmission.html>

For more information, contact Ascend at [info@WeAscend.org](mailto:info@WeAscend.org) or call 202-248-5420