

Zika scare: CDC issues travel warning to 11 Southeast Asian countries

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Singapore: With Zika continuing to wreak havoc in southeast Asia, the US CDC has advised pregnant women to postpone travel to 11 countries in Southeast Asia because of Zika outbreaks in the region. Since the Zika outbreak began last year, thousands of babies, mostly in Brazil, have been born with the devastating brain defect after their mothers were infected with the mosquito-borne virus during pregnancy.

The advisory issued Thursday targets travel to Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Maldives, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam.

Meanwhile, authorities in Thailand have confirmed that two cases of babies with microcephaly, or abnormally small heads, were caused by the Zika virus, the first such cases found in Southeast Asia.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently released new recommendations on how long men with either Zika infection or exposure should abstain from trying to conceive, lengthening the waiting period from eight weeks to six months.

The disease is spread primarily by mosquitoes, and WHO urged private citizens as well as governments to take strict mosquito control measures.

WHO said travelers to areas with Zika virus outbreaks "should seek up-to-date advice on potential risks and appropriate measures to reduce the possibility of exposure to mosquito bites and sexual transmission of Zika." But it advised pregnant women "not to travel to areas of ongoing Zika virus transmission." "Pregnant women's sexual partners living in or returning from areas with Zika virus outbreaks should ensure safer sex or abstain from sex for the duration of their partner's pregnancy," it said.

Thailand has confirmed 349 Zika cases since January, including 33 pregnant women, and Singapore has recorded 393 Zika cases, including 16 pregnant women. There is no vaccine or treatment for Zika. An estimated 80% of people infected have no symptoms, making it difficult for pregnant women to know whether they have been infected.

Health authorities in the region said they were stepping up monitoring, but there has been little testing and officials said the real number of cases was bound to be higher than the confirmed figure.

"We do not test everybody, we test only those who are symptomatic," said Paulyn Jean Rosell-Ubia, health secretary in the Philippines, which has reported 12 Zika cases. Microcephaly in babies can lead to respiratory problems related to malformation of the brain, a serious threat to the lives of babies. Children with microcephaly face lifelong difficulties, including intellectual impairment.