

Legal update

Mitigating the risk of contracting Zika virus – what employers and employees can do

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Employment and labour

Images and news articles about the Zika virus have spread like wildfire in the media. Its newsworthiness is due in large part to the correlation between the virus and the number of cases of babies with microcephaly, particularly in Brazil. While mosquito-borne viruses like Zika are nothing new, the possibility that pregnant women who contract the Zika virus can affect their fetuses has engendered widespread discussion about how to mitigate the risks of contraction and how to address the rapid increase in cases of microcephaly in newborns. Employers should consider taking precautions when requesting that employees travel to the affected areas.

Helpfully, the U.S. Centre for Disease Control (CDC) has released a series of [guidelines](#) to assist individuals in preventing the transmission of the Zika virus. Since the virus is contracted via mosquitos, the guidelines provide tools for avoiding mosquito bites, which include wearing long-sleeved shirts, applying insect repellent and using mosquito bed nets.

Who's at risk

The correlative relationship between microcephaly and the Zika virus has led the CDC to advise pregnant women to delay travel to regions affected by the Zika virus. Similarly, men who may be contemplating having children may also consider delaying travel to these regions as there is limited [evidence](#) to suggest the virus can be sexually transmitted. If pregnant women are considering travel to these regions, they should consult with their health practitioner.

Option to change travel plans

Employers can assist in mitigating these risks by providing employees with the opportunity to delay or cancel travel to Zika-affected regions. Employers should also warn employees who are going on vacation or are required to travel to Zika-affected regions to follow all relevant guidelines and, if necessary, consult a health practitioner before departure.

It is important to keep in mind that although this virus has particular consequences for pregnant women, employers should be careful to ensure all employees are aware of the risks. We suggest that all employees who may be required to travel to Zika-affected regions as part of their employment be provided information on the risks, how to prevent contraction and the possibility of altering travel plans in light of the risks of their particular situation.

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