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## Health Care

# Abortion requests surge in countries infested with Zika, Texas study finds

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The Dallas Morning News

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The number of abortion requests in Latin America has soared in the wake of the Zika virus epidemic, according to an analysis by Texas researchers.

Zika, a mosquito-borne illness, can cause severe birth defects and has prompted warnings from the World Health Organization. The disease has

ravaged Latin America, where abortion is largely illegal.

No local transmission of the virus has been reported in the U.S., but more travelers are getting infected. Dallas County reported this week that **10 pregnant women** have tested positive for Zika.

In Latin American countries that issued national advisories to pregnant women and where abortion is banned or highly restricted, requests to end a pregnancy have jumped anywhere from 36 to 108 percent, the study found.

The study -- led by a team that includes two researchers from the University of Texas at Austin -- analyzed requests made to Women on Web, a nonprofit that provides abortion medication to women who live in countries where they can't get a safe abortion.

"I contracted zika 4 days ago ... I love children," a Venezuelan woman wrote to the nonprofit. "But I don't believe it is a wise decision to keep a baby who will suffer. I need an abortion. I don't know who to turn to. Please help me ASAP."

Scientists studied requests from January 2010 to March 2016 in 19 Latin American countries. Specifically, they wanted to track changes in the flow of requests after a regional advisory in November 2015 that warned about an increase in birth defects in **Zika-infested Brazil**.

There is scientific consensus that Zika is a cause of microcephaly, a condition that leads to abnormally small heads in newborns. Some cases result in developmental delays.

Researchers compared the actual number of requests Women on Web received after the regional advisory with the number of requests expected based on trends in those countries.

In a letter to *The New England Journal of Medicine*, researchers said they couldn't "definitively" attribute the bump in abortion requests to concerns about Zika. However, the percentage of women citing that as their

reason to seek an abortion corresponds with the data from their specific countries, according to the study.

"Our approach may underestimate the effect of the advisories on demand for abortion, since many women may have used an unsafe method, accessed misoprostol [an abortion drug] from local pharmacies or the black market, or visited local underground providers," researchers wrote. "But accurate data on these choices are difficult to obtain."

The UT researchers are Dr. Abigail R.A. Aiken and James G. Scott.

**Your Zika Questions Answered, by *The Dallas Morning News*' Dr. Seema Yasmin:**

**What are the symptoms of Zika?** Four out of five people with the virus won't have any symptoms. For that one person who does get sick, the symptoms are relatively mild and include fever, rash, red eyes and aches and pains that last for a few days to a week.

**How long does Zika stay in the body?** It doesn't seem to stay in the bloodstream for long, only about two to seven days, but it can stick around in urine and semen for longer. In a recent report from France, a man infected a woman with Zika through unprotected sex more than a month after he had been sick. Because Zika can stay in semen for at least two months, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends men wait six months after the first symptoms of Zika before having unprotected sex. For women, the CDC recommends waiting two months after infection before trying to have a baby.

**What are the long-term effects of Zika?** For most people who have symptoms of Zika, the virus is not a long-term concern. But the virus has been linked to a rare nerve disease called Guillain-Barre syndrome which causes paralysis. Most people with the disease recover from the paralysis, which can last up to several months -- but one in 20 die. Zika has also been found to cause microcephaly, a birth defect that causes newborns to have abnormally small heads. Experts estimate that up to 13 percent of women

who have Zika during the first trimester of pregnancy could have a child with microcephaly. Other Zika-related birth problems include miscarriage and babies born with a low birth weight, and vision and hearing problems.

**Do more people coming back to the U.S. with Zika increase the risk of local outbreaks?** Yes. The virus is transmitted through the bite of an infected mosquito, but the mosquitoes themselves become infected when they feed on the blood of a human with Zika. The mosquitoes that spread Zika live across large parts of the U.S., including Texas, and if they bite an infected person, that could start a local outbreak.

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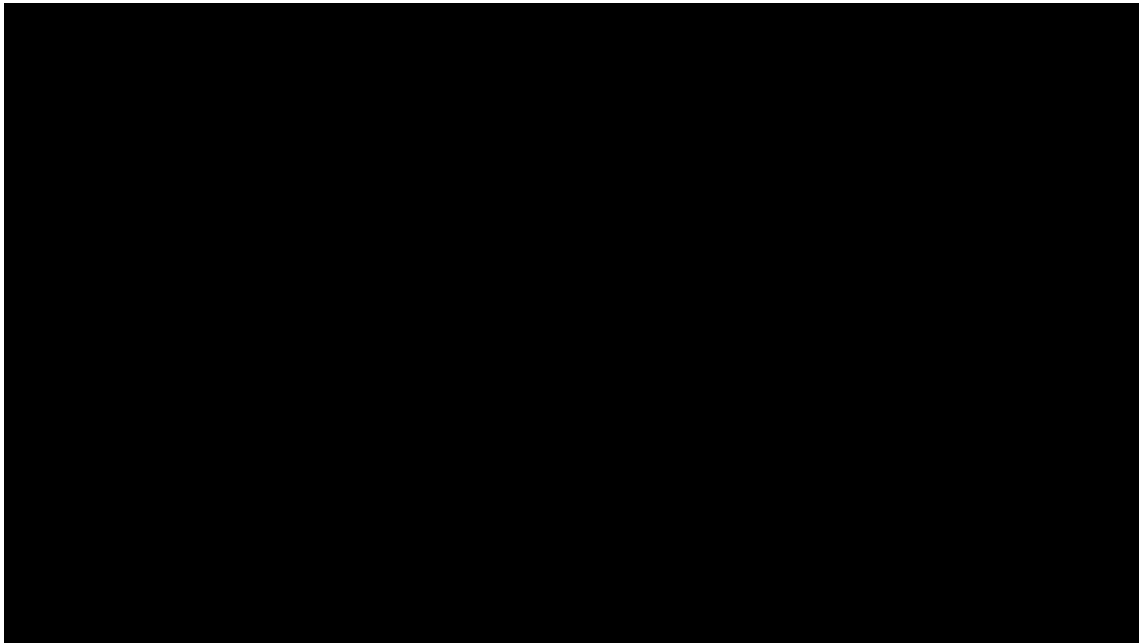
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