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TODAY'S HEALTH FOR THE EMPOWERED WOMAN

THE ZIKA VIRUS

I am currently wintering in the United States Virgin Islands and as this goes to press I am inundated with articles about the new Zika virus, the panic it is creating and the very real ramifications it is causing for pregnant women, their offspring, women who are trying to become pregnant and for the countries in which the virus has been detected in terms of a health emergency as well as a potential socioeconomic disaster. It has been known since the building of the Panama Canal that mosquitoes were the vector for the transmission of yellow fever, dengue fever and malaria. Prior to understanding of the role of mosquitoes it was thought as far back as ancient Rome that wet, humid and hot conditions created bad ("mal") air ("aria") and great pains were taken to drain swamps etc. Once mosquitoes were found to be the real culprits and their reproductive physiology was understood to include that females need blood to reproduce –and that biting uninfected individuals spread disease, chemical agents were invented, chiefly DDT, that when sprayed in tropical climates killed the mosquitoes. Alas, it was also noted after a time that concurrent with the diminution in malaria cases so did the white pelicans disappear, It was found that the DDT softened the pelican's egg shells to such a degree that when mother bird sat upon her nest the eggs broke and hence white pelicans are gone and so is DDT. However, the mosquitoes are not gone and the world is plagued by mosquito borne diseases as noted above. Last year there was an outbreak of Chikungunya, also caused by mosquitoes that causes weeks if not months of disabling joint pain. The very word "chikungunya" in some native tongue from Africa means "pain in bending over". Of note there is no cure nor is there a cure for any viral illness. The key was prevention by eliminating areas where water can collect as a breeding ground for insects—old tires, birdbaths, gullies, flower pots etc and the liberal use of insect repellent that contains DEET. However, this year the panic, justifiably so, is the Zika virus mostly noted in Brazil and now raging like a storm in the Caribbean Islands and the American South. Likewise carried by the same mosquito with few symptoms—mostly a low grade fever, slight rash and perhaps conjunctivitis. What is significant for women is that there seems to be a dramatic rise in microcephaly where Zika is most prevalent. Microcephaly is defined as a small head in the fetus and/or newborn with subsequent smaller brain and developmental abnormalities. The World Health Organization, The Centers for Disease Control and the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists have all published information and directives. Let me distill here the chief take away points in this chief travel season to warmer climates. The incubation is roughly 3 days. Pregnant women should delay travel to areas where there are known outbreaks and women considering pregnancy should discuss the advisability of travel with their obstetrical team. If traveling to areas where Zika has been reported precautions to avoid mosquito bites including the use of mosquito repellents with DEET, covering exposed skin and staying in screened air conditioned areas. These repellents are safe in pregnancy. Women who have travelled to high risk areas should be evaluated by

ultrasound that can detect abnormal fetal head size and consideration of pregnancy termination or delivery at a center with neonatal expertise may be warranted. Women with symptoms can be tested for the virus and those without symptoms that have travelled to affected areas should be tested also. The fetus should be managed with serial ultrasounds to evaluate head size. Concerning breastfeeding, very small amounts of virus have been found and most likely not harmful to the neonate so breast feeding should continue. The recommendations are changing daily but the risks to the fetus are real. Above all before traveling consult with your obstetrical provider who is receiving almost daily updates from the CDC or you can find this information online. At this time it would be well advised for women who are pregnant or considering pregnancy to avoid traveling to areas that the World Health Organization has designated high risk. In fact, some cruise lines are refunding fares to pregnant women who cancel. If you are looking to get away from the cold and snow choose wisely.