



Abortion requests increase in Latin America after Zika warning, figures show

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Requests for abortions from women in Latin American countries increased dramatically after the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) issued an alert on Zika virus in November 2015, an analysis has shown.¹

In response to the alert, several countries issued health warnings that advised women to avoid pregnancy. Abortion is illegal or very restricted in most Latin American countries but the nonprofit organization Women on Web (www.womenonweb.org) provides access to abortion medications through online telemedicine in countries where safe abortion is not universally available.

Researchers analyzed requests for abortion through Women on Web between January 2010 and March 2016 in 19 Latin American countries. They compared the number of requests made before and after PAHO issued the alert.

The number of requests in Brazil doubled compared with that expected. A total of 1210 women requested abortions from November 2015 to March 2016, while only 581.7 requests were expected (relative change 108.0%, $P<0.001$).

Abortion requests in Colombia increased by nearly 38.7%, with 141 requests compared with the 101.7 expected from previous trends (relative change 38.7%, $P<0.001$).

Control countries without indigenous transmission of Zika, including Chile and Uruguay, showed small decreases in requests over the same period.

“Our data provide a window on how concern about Zika may have affected the lives of pregnant women in Latin America,” said the researchers, led by Abigail Aiken from the University of Texas at Austin, Texas in the US.

They acknowledged that their figures may underestimate the effect of warnings about Zika in pregnancy on the demand for abortion. “Many women may have used an unsafe method, accessed misoprostol from local pharmacies or the black market, or visited local underground providers. But accurate data on these choices are difficult to obtain,” they said.

The World Health Organization predicted that 3 to 4 million people across North America, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean would contract Zika virus during the early months of 2017. “Official information and advice about potential exposure to the Zika virus should be accompanied by efforts to ensure that all reproductive choices are safe, legal, and accessible,” the research group concluded.

1 Aiken ARA, Scott JG, Gomperts R, et al. Requests for abortion in Latin America related to concern about Zika virus exposure. *N Engl J Med* 2016. doi:10.1056/NEJMc1605389.

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