NEWS

Men and women should practise safe sex for six months to avoid Zika, says WHO

Anne Gulland

London

The World Health Organization has strengthened its advice on preventing sexual transmission of the Zika virus, recommending that both men and women practise safe sex for six months after returning from an area where an infection is present, even if they have no symptoms.¹

The previous guidance, published in June, stated that only men needed to practise safe sex and for a period of just two months.

The new advice is based on a case study, which showed that an Italian man still had virus in his semen 188 days after the onset of symptoms of Zika.

Until June this year sexual transmission of the virus was thought to occur only via men who had symptoms. But the first possible case of sexual transmission between a man with no symptoms and a woman was documented in Brittany, France, in June. And the first case of a woman passing the virus to her male partner was documented in New York in July. The virus was found in the woman's vaginal fluids and cervical mucus.

The new guidance said that the virus has been found in saliva and urine up to 91 days after infection.

In regions with active Zika transmission WHO recommended that sexually active men and women were given information about safe sex and access to appropriate contraceptives. Pregnant women should practise safe sex for the whole of their pregnancy.

Travellers who had been in an area where there was active virus transmission should not conceive for six months after their return home to ensure that the infection had cleared, WHO recommended.

1 World Health Organization. Prevention of sexual transmission of Zika virus. Interim guidance update. September 2016. www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/zika/sexual-transmission-prevention/en/

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