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This Group Is Giving Free Medical Abortions to Women in the Zika Zone

By **Susan Rinkunas**



Medical abortion pill RU-486. Photo: Phil Walter/Getty Images

As the Zika virus continues to spread "**explosively**" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/29/health/zika-virus-spreading-explosively-in-americas-who-says.html>) " through Latin America, experts are **investigating**" (<http://time.com/4196390/brazil-zika-virus-outbreak>) whether the mosquito-borne infection is indeed to blame for the uptick in cases of microcephaly, a birth defect in which infants are born with underdeveloped brains and heads. As a precaution, some countries' health departments have suggested women **avoid getting pregnant**" (<http://nymag.com/thecut/2016/01/zika-el-salvador-delay-pregnancy-until-2018.html>) for six months to two years. (Pregnant women in the United States have only been advised **not to travel**" (<http://nymag.com/thecut/2016/01/zika-virus-future-pregnancies.html>) to affected countries.)

Yet there are the already-pregnant women concerned about the possibility of having children with **severe developmental problems**" (<http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/01/29/464811052/doctors-see-profound-abnormalities-in-zika-linked-microcephaly-cases>) in a region that greatly **restricts**" (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/02/02/zika-highlights-lack-access-contraception-abortion-latin-america/79640840/>) abortion access. Now, Dutch reproductive health group Women on Web — the same organization behind last summer's "**abortion drone**" (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11691081/Abortion-drone-to->

drop-DIY-drugs-over-Poland-to-women.html) " **flight from Germany to Poland** — has said it will offer **free medical abortions** (<http://www.womenonwaves.org/en/page/6210/free-medical-abortion-for-pregnant-women-with-zika-offered-by-women-on-web>) for Zika-infected pregnant women who live in countries that limit abortions, but there are a few caveats.

The medications (mifepristone and misoprostol) only work during the **first nine weeks** (<http://apps.who.int/medicinedocs/en/d/Js7918e/5.1.2.html>) of pregnancy, and packages could take up to five weeks to arrive, so women interested in obtaining a medical abortion should contact the group as soon as possible. Women would **email** (http://mce_host/apps/nymag/components/page/info@womenonweb.org%20) their lab results confirming a Zika infection to the group and complete an online consultation that a doctor reviews for eligibility.

The free medication is available to women in the following **countries** (<http://www.womenonwaves.org/en/page/6210/free-medical-abortion-for-pregnant-women-with-zika-offered-by-women-on-web>) that restrict abortion: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, **El Salvador** (<http://nymag.com/thecut/2016/01/zika-el-salvador-delay-pregnancy-until-2018.html>), Guadeloupe, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Suriname, and Venezuela.

Notably absent from this list is Brazil, the country at the epicenter of the Zika outbreak, which has seen **nearly 4,000 cases** (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-35368401>) of microcephaly since October. Abortion is **illegal in Brazil** (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/01/abortion-in-brazil-a-matter-of-life-and-death>) except in the cases of rape; when the mother's life is at risk; or if the fetus has **anencephaly** (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/anencephaly.html>), a birth defect in which the brain and skull are even less developed than in microcephaly. The group writes:

Unfortunately the Brazilian government stops all packages that contain medical abortions. Women on Web calls upon the Brazilian government and Anvisa to suspend the interception of packages with medical abortions at least for the duration of the Zika epidemic.

Activists are concerned that lack of access to safe, legal abortions during the Zika outbreak **could lead to an increase** (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/29/zika-virus-unsafe-abortion-contraception-latin-america>) in women seeking so-called back-alley abortions. An estimated 95 percent of the 4.4 million abortions performed in Latin America in 2008 were considered **unsafe** (<http://qz.com/602033/in-latin-america-one-crucial-tool-to-fight-the-zika-virus-is-almost-impossible-to-access/>) and resulted in more than 750,000 Latin American women being **hospitalized** (<http://qz.com/602033/in-latin-america-one-crucial-tool-to-fight-the-zika-virus-is-almost-impossible-to-access/>).

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