

Zika highlights lack of access to contraception, abortion in Latin America



Liz Szabo, USA TODAY

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(Photo: Felipe Dana, AP)

The Zika outbreak spreading throughout Latin American and the Caribbean is shedding light on what women's health advocates call an equally important public health crisis: the lack of contraception and basic maternity care in much of the region.

Last week, the government of El Salvador advised women to postpone pregnancy for two years to reduce the risk of serious birth defects linked to the Zika virus, which has spread to 25 countries and territories in Latin America. The virus is associated with microcephaly, a birth defect in which babies are born with abnormally small heads and often suffer from intellectual disabilities.

"They are making these recommendations, as if this is something that is always a woman's choice," said Alejandra Colom, who works in [Guatemala](#) for the [Population Council](#), which studies family planning. "These decisions are not necessarily in the hands of women."



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[Health officials downplay risks for Zika virus during Rio Olympics](#)

[\(http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/olympics/2016/02/02/health-officials-downplay-risks-zika-virus-during-rio-olympics/79693666/\)](http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/olympics/2016/02/02/health-officials-downplay-risks-zika-virus-during-rio-olympics/79693666/)

In many Latin American and Caribbean countries, basic contraception, such as birth control pills and IUDs, are in short supply. That means even women with access to a doctor or clinic may not be able to get birth control, Colom said.

The region's conservative culture often puts men in control of their family's size, rather than women, Colom said. Many women are unable to persuade their partners to use condoms.

Colom hopes the Zika virus outbreak — which [Honduras](#) declared a state of emergency Monday just hours after the [World Health Organization](#) called it an international emergency — will change conversations around contraception and lead governments to make birth control more available.

Several nations in the region ban abortion in all circumstances, including Chile, the [Dominican Republic](#), El Salvador, [Haiti](#), Honduras and [Nicaragua](#). But the strict laws haven't stopped women from ending pregnancies.

About 4.4 million women had abortions in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2008. About 95% of those abortions were considered unsafe, because they were performed by people without adequate training or conducted in an environment that didn't meet medical standards, according to the [Guttmacher Institute](#), a U.S.-based non-profit that researches family planning.

The abortion rate in Latin America and the Caribbean is 31 to 32 abortions per 1,000 women ages 15 to 44, compared to the U.S. rate of 28 abortions per 1,000 women the same age, according to Guttmacher.



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[See where the Zika virus has spread in the Western Hemisphere](#)

[\(http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/02/02/map-zika-virus-western-hemisphere/79689970/\)](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/02/02/map-zika-virus-western-hemisphere/79689970/)

At least 10% of maternal deaths in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2014 were due to unsafe abortions, according to Guttmacher. About 760,000 women in the region were hospitalized due to complications from unsafe abortions.

An abortion rights group called Women on the Web has offered to help women in Zika-affected countries undergo medical abortions by sending free pills to women less than 9 weeks pregnant. Abortion rights opponents have criticized the practice as dangerous. Microcephaly is typically diagnosed with ultrasound around the 24th week of pregnancy.

Basic maternity care is also often lacking in Latin America and the Caribbean. While nearly all women from wealthy households give birth in health care facilities, nearly one-third of very poor women in the region deliver their babies at home or somewhere other than a medical facility, according to Guttmacher.

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[\(http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/02/01/who-health-emergency-zika/79647164/\)](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/02/01/who-health-emergency-zika/79647164/)

Only half of women who need care for medical complications of delivery and pregnancy receive it, according to Guttmacher. These complications include high blood pressure, infection or obstructed labor, a condition treated with C-section in the USA. Such complications can be fatal for mother and baby if left untreated.

Latin America and the Caribbean could cut the number of maternal deaths by an estimated 65% — from 9,300 deaths per year to 3,300 — by providing effective contraception and adequate maternity care, including care for HIV. These improvements would also reduce newborn deaths by an estimated 70%, from 107,000 a year to 32,000, according to Guttmacher. Providing adequate contraception also would reduce the number of unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions by 65%.



In this Jan. 29, 2016 photo, Transito de Los Angeles Vasquez, 30, has her prenatal check-up at the National Hospital for Women in San Salvador, El Salvador. In the Central American nation, authorities have urged women to put off pregnancy for two years. Latin American governments are preparing as Zika, mosquito-borne illness, spreads through the continent. Authorities in Brazil, where the outbreak began, announced a possible link between Zika and microcephaly, in which infants are born with unusually small heads and can sometimes suffer mental retardation or a host of serious health and developmental problems. (Photo: Salvador Melendez, AP)

ZIKA VIRUS

The mosquito-borne virus is new to the Western Hemisphere, but it already has spread to several countries.

● Confirmed cases



Countries:

Barbados	French Guiana	Puerto Rico
Bolivia	Guadeloupe	Saint Martin
Brazil	Guatemala	Suriname
Cape Verde	Guyana	U.S. Virgin Islands
Colombia	Haiti	Venezuela
Costa Rica	Honduras	American Samoa ¹
Curacao	Martinique	Samoa ¹
Dominican Republic	Mexico	
Ecuador	Nicaragua	
El Salvador	Panama	
	Paraguay	

SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1 - Not shown on map.
Janet Loehrke, USA TODAY



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