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Biology's Matt Heard Explains Worries Over Zika

Winthrop University

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Biology's Matt Heard Explains Worries Over Zika

Quick Facts

- Heard says experts believe the Zika virus concentrated in Brazil in 2014 or 2015 based on World Cup travel.
- Zika was first found in Africa in 1947.



Matt Heard

ROCK HILL, SOUTH CAROLINA — Google 'Zika,' and you'll come up with results on every news site from CNN to BuzzFeed about the virus and its recent spread across the world.

Winthrop University **Assistant Professor of Biology Matt Heard** researches infectious diseases and has been following the Zika virus story with much interest.

Zika has captured headlines with its notable cases in Brazil.

"We think it got there in 2014, 2015," Heard said. "People are guessing that it may be from the World Cup and all the travel associated with that. Diseases move around the world as the world becomes increasingly globalized. It's easy for a mosquito that's carrying this to potentially pop up."

The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** has encouraged people, specifically pregnant women, to not travel to and from Latin America.

In Brazil, experts are attempting to link the birth defect known as microcephaly with the Zika virus. Babies born with microcephaly have abnormally small heads and improper brain development. However, Heard said microcephaly isn't necessarily only caused by Zika virus because it can be attributed to genetic factors as well.

Currently, Brazil has 4,000 suspected cases of microcephaly, Heard said. Approximately 400 have actually been confirmed as microcephaly; of that 400, only 17 have been linked to Zika, although Heard said that could be an underestimate.

Classified as a 'flavavirus,' the Zika virus is transmitted by mosquitos and was first found in Africa in 1947, Heard said. The virus has mostly been confined to Africa and Asia because the mosquitos that transmit Zika—*Aedes aegypti*—are primarily located there. While that specific mosquito species isn't widely distributed across the United States, they are found in the southeastern US due to the warm climates.

"The reason why we don't see a ton of these cases is because we have mosquito control that we do, air conditioning in houses, general sanitation," Heard explained. "What's scary, though, with *Aedes aegypti* is that it can bite during the day. This is a very aggressive one during the day."

The CDC just declared a Zika case in Texas, saying that was sexually transmitted, which Heard said was unusual since Zika is "primarily a blood-borne pathogen."

At this point in time, there is no vaccine for Zika. The **World Health Organization (WHO)** is pushing for more study into the disease and work on a vaccine, even though a vaccine wouldn't be ready until the end of 2016 at the earliest.

Interested in talking with Dr. Heard about Zika? Contact Nicole Chisari, communications coordinator, **via email** or 803/323-2236.

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