

Zika Outbreak: The Mosquito Menace

The mosquito *Aedes aegypti* is causing widespread fear in Brazil where it is spreading the Zika virus that has been linked to thousands of babies being born with birth defects.

Exactly what do we know about this mosquito? It loves cities. It is not a jungle-dwelling insect that rarely comes into contact with people. Like cockroaches and pigeons, it thrives in built-up areas. It does not need natural water sources to breed as it can lay eggs in the small and plentiful pools of stagnant water, such as gutters or flower pots, found in cities.

This mosquito is really adapted well for urban areas. Therefore, it multiplies in a world that is becoming more and more urbanised. And Brazil is an extreme example of this rapid urbanisation of the world, going from 20% to 80% urban in 70 years.

Aedes aegypti has long been known as the yellow fever mosquito and 390 million people are infected with the dengue virus each year, largely as a result of bites from this mosquito species. But Zika is currently getting all the attention.

Deaths are rare and only one-in-five people infected is thought to develop symptoms, which include mild fever, headache and joint pain. There is no vaccine or drug treatment; so patients are simply advised to rest and drink plenty of fluids.

However, the biggest concern is the impact the virus is suspected to have on babies developing in the womb, leading to the births of thousands of babies with underdeveloped brains. Therefore, the World Health Organization has declared the Zika virus a global public health emergency and doctors are advising women in affected countries to delay getting pregnant because there is still a lot we do not know in this emerging infection.

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Additional vocabulary

Cinnamon – miscellaneous – haemorrhage – rhythm - resuscitation