

# Opinion: Is the risk of spreading Zika worth canceling the Olympics?

By Peter Singer, Project Syndicate, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.09.16

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This April 11, 2016, photo shows Carioca Arena 1 behind palm trees inside Rio 2016 Olympic Park in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Photo: AP Photo/Felipe Dana

When Rio de Janeiro was picked as the city that would host the 2016 Olympic Games, the Zika virus had yet to reach Brazil. Billions of dollars have been invested in preparing for the Games since then.

Now, Brazil is the epicenter of the Zika outbreak and Rio de Janeiro state has the second highest number of suspected infections. Should the 2016 Summer Olympic Games be postponed or moved elsewhere?

This is a difficult decision, and the facts are still not clear enough. That is why, last month, I joined 223 scientists and public health experts in signing an open letter to Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO). We are asking her to put

together an independent group to advise both the WHO and the International Olympic Committee. Such a group would be best positioned to provide the unbiased evidence needed to balance public health against disruption to a great international sporting event.

## **Current Strain Of Zika More Dangerous Than Any Other**

The Zika virus is not new, but the strain that entered Brazil in 2013 is more dangerous than any known variant. A study published last month has confirmed that when the virus infects a pregnant woman, it can prevent normal brain development in her unborn child. The result is a rare condition known as microcephaly, characterized by a smaller than average head. In severe cases, microcephaly makes it impossible for a child to ever live an independent life.

The Brazilian outbreak of Zika virus has been linked with a particularly devastating form of microcephaly known as fetal brain disruption sequence. Until Zika spread to Brazil, only a handful of fetuses with that condition had been recorded. Recently, a study of 35 fetuses with microcephaly in Brazil found that 11 of them had fetal brain disruption sequence.

The latest research confirming the link between Zika and microcephaly builds on a recent study of pregnant women in Rio de Janeiro with symptoms suggestive of Zika infection. Of those in which the infection was confirmed, 29 percent were carrying a fetus with a serious abnormality. None of the women in whom the infection was not confirmed had an abnormal fetus.

In adults, Zika brings a high fever and a rash. More worryingly, it apparently can also lead to Guillain-Barré syndrome, a devastating and sometimes life-threatening disorder that can cause paralysis for several months or even years. The risk of developing Guillain-Barré syndrome for an adult infected with Zika remains unknown.

## **Pregnant Women Should Not Travel To Brazil**

The WHO has declared Zika a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern,” and has advised pregnant women not to travel to Brazil. However, how does staying at home help a pregnant woman if others bring the virus back from Rio? With 500,000 people expected to attend the Olympics, that is likely to happen in several countries in which *Aedes aegypti*, the mosquito that can transmit the virus, is present.

Two arguments will be made against this reason for postponing or moving the Games. First, the risk of infection in winter is low, as there are fewer mosquitoes, and Brazil is using the military to spray areas where mosquitoes breed. However, some scientists point to a worrying fact: While the transmission of dengue fever, a virus that is related to Zika and transmitted by the same species of mosquito, declines during the the Rio winter, it does not cease altogether. The same is likely to be true of the Zika virus.

As for the spraying, it may not be all that effective, given that Rio has seen a sharp, unexplained increase in dengue this year. The neighborhood of Olympic Park, where events will take place, has had more cases of dengue in the first quarter of 2016 than in all of 2015.

### **Perhaps Spread Of Zika Is Inevitable**

The second response is to say that millions of tourists visit Rio anyway, so the spread of Zika to other countries is bound to happen one way or another. According to this line of thinking, it makes little difference whether visitors who bring it back to their home countries went to the Olympics.

However, as a result of the Brazilian outbreak, research into Zika has accelerated. It is now reasonable to hope that a vaccine, anti-viral drug or other means of combating the infection or its spread will be found.

So when the infection spreads is critical. If the Olympics go ahead as scheduled, visitors will come to Brazil from many more countries than would otherwise be the case. If they bring Zika back to regions with inadequate health-care systems — West Africa or South Asia, for example — millions of infections could occur before effective means of prevention or cure are developed.

### **WHO Not In Favor Of Canceling Olympics**

The WHO has said that canceling the Olympic Games would “compromise the huge investment that athletes and others have made in preparing for what should be a fantastic occasion.” No doubt it would, but that needs to be balanced against the risks of spreading a dangerous virus. The Olympic Charter asserts that social responsibility and respect for fundamental moral principles are at the core of the Olympic movement.

It is neither socially responsible nor moral to ignore the risks that the Zika virus poses to adults and to children yet to be born. Perhaps the risks are low enough to justify going ahead with the Rio Olympics, but perhaps they are not. Until qualified experts have laid out all the facts, the world should stay away.

*Peter Singer is Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University and Laureate Professor at the University of Melbourne.*

## Quiz

- 1 Read the sentence from the section "Perhaps Spread Of Zika Is Inevitable."

*If they bring Zika back to regions with inadequate health-care systems — West Africa or South Asia, for example — millions of infections could occur before effective means of prevention or cure are developed.*

Which word is the BEST substitute for "inadequate"?

- (A) insufficient
- (B) inappropriate
- (C) indescribable
- (D) incomprehensible

- 2 Read the sentence from the third paragraph of the article.

*Such a group would be best positioned to provide the unbiased evidence needed to balance public health against disruption to a great international sporting event.*

What does the author's use of the phrase "unbiased evidence" convey in the sentence?

- (A) that the research about Zika virus is lacking overall
  - (B) that the health issue is pressing and immediate
  - (C) that opposing sides are offering strong opinions about Rio
  - (D) that scientists are invested in ending the Zika outbreak
- 3 Which answer choice BEST summarizes the author's feelings about canceling the Olympics?
- (A) The author sees this option as disrespectful to the athletes who have trained so hard.
  - (B) The author sees this option as the only realistic way to protect people from Zika.
  - (C) The author sees this option as reasonable until evidence and experts suggest something else.
  - (D) The author sees this option as an overreaction since the risk of contracting Zika is fairly low.

Read the last paragraph in the section "Perhaps Spread Of Zika Is Inevitable."

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Which statement BEST summarizes the point the author makes in this paragraph?

- (A) Many people will come to visit Brazil if the Olympics are not cancelled.
- (B) If the Olympics are not relocated, Zika could spread to the most vulnerable people.
- (C) There is not enough time to develop a cure for Zika before the Olympics start.
- (D) It will be impossible to prevent an outbreak of Zika if the Olympics are held in Brazil.

## Answer Key

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