

The Boston Globe

Fearing Zika virus, many cancel or alter plans

By Christopher Muther and Corlyn Voorhees

GLOBE STAFF | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 01, 2016

Once the mosquito-borne Zika started making headlines, Simanta Buck and her husband had a decision to make: Should they go ahead with plans to celebrate the upcoming birth of their child by taking a “babymoon” vacation in the Dominican Republic, or cancel to avoid exposure to the virus linked to birth defects?

The Medford couple read travel advisories and consulted her doctor and family. The result: a “better safe than sorry” approach; they shelved the trip.

“When all is said and done, I just feel lucky we were able to cancel before we got there,” she said.

Many other travelers are making the same call. Airlines, cruise companies, and resorts have been scrambling to put together policies for handling credits, refunds, and trip alternatives as pregnant women begin to rethink traveling to affected areas.

So far, the Centers for Disease Control has issued travel advisories covering 23 countries and territories in the Americas, including most tourist hot spots in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America. The virus has also been reported in Samoa and Cape Verde. Due to the risk of microcephaly, the CDC recommends that pregnant women and women who are contemplating pregnancy avoid travel to the affected areas.

A survey from the travel risk-management company On Call International, released Friday, found that 64 percent of Americans said they would cancel trips to areas affected by Zika.

The World Health Organization's director general, Margaret Chan, last week told members of the United Nations that the virus is "spreading explosively." The WHO estimates as many as 4 million people worldwide could be infected by the end of 2016.

Symptoms of Zika include a mild fever, a rash, and conjunctivitis. Unlike mosquito-spread illnesses such as dengue fever and chikungunya, Zika has caused alarm because it has been linked to microcephaly, a condition in which babies are born with abnormally small heads and brains that have not developed properly.

The WHO is holding an emergency meeting Monday to determine whether "the outbreak constitutes a public health emergency of international concern."

One case of Zika has been reported in Boston, from someone who contracted it abroad. Only about 20 percent of infected people have any symptoms.

The alarm surrounding Zika is a potentially heavy blow to the tourism-dependent economies of the Caribbean, where newlyweds and couples flock for warm weather, sunsets, and romance. It could also significantly cut travel to the 2016 summer Olympics in Brazil, where there has been a sharp increase in serious birth defects and more than a million residents are presumed infected.

Because the CDC travel advisory was issued Jan. 15, many travel industry experts say it's too early to see hard data on trip cancellations.

"We cannot be totally sure about the impact of the news regarding Zika," said Laura Rodriguez, the lead analyst for ForwardKeys, a company that predicts

travel trends through booking patterns. “The Caribbean as a whole is showing a decline that has become sharper starting Jan. 25, but we still cannot assess Zika to be the only, or main, reason for that.”

Third-party travel-booking sites such as Expedia, TripAdvisor, and Travelzoo all reported they are unsure what the Zika fallout will be.

But you don’t need to a crystal ball to see the travel industry will take a hit, given the potential dangers of Zika for pregnant women and those planning families — particularly in honeymoon havens such as St. Lucia and St. John.

“I think it’s going to be a huge fallout for many areas,” said Summer Hull, who runs the family travel website [Mommy Points](#) . “The risks are so great for the population it can impact that I think you’re going to see a huge number of cancellations. Right now it’s the airlines, and then what happens if you’ve booked with a resort in one of those areas?”

Lindsay Tobias of Maryland decided to cancel her Bahamas vacation a night before her scheduled departure, despite the fact the Bahamas had not yet been included in the travel advisory.

“After hearing that it was a matter of time before it would be spreading to all Caribbean islands, I said, ‘I’ll take it seriously. It’s not there yet, but I don’t want to be the first person affected in the Bahamas,’ ” said Tobias, who is pregnant.

She was traveling on Southwest Airlines and had no problem getting her money back.

American Airlines will offer refunds to pregnant women and their traveling companions with a doctor’s note. Delta said travelers may qualify for a change to alternate destinations, different travel dates, or a refund. Customers can change tickets without being hit with a fee if they do so by Feb. 29. United

Airlines and JetBlue announced they will let people flying to affected areas rebook for a later date or get a refund.

Cruise lines have announced similar policies. Norwegian, Royal Caribbean, and Carnival are offering refunds, credits, or alternate routes.

Cancellations have not gone smoothly for everyone. Buck, who canceled her trip to the Dominican Republic, filed a complaint with the Better Business Bureau, took to social media, and talked to “Good Morning America” before Expedia waived its cancellation fee. A spokeswoman said Expedia “has no information to share” on its policy.

Megan Finn of Chicago said she had a hard time when she tried to change her American Airlines tickets. She planned a Caribbean trip with her mother and sister, but Finn intends to have children and her sister is pregnant. After Finn posted a complaint on American’s Facebook page, the company waived its \$200 change fee.

“Neither one of us is willing to risk the lives of our unborn children for a beach vacation,” Finn said.