



[Zika virus, so far, hasn't curbed business travel](#)

By Julie Sickel

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Even as fears rise about the mosquito-borne Zika virus in Latin America and other global regions, corporate travelers are treating the global scare as business as usual.

"For the moment, we haven't seen either a decline in new bookings, whether it's flight or hotel, neither have we seen an increase in cancellations since the recent cases," said Vicky Fernandez, senior vice president and general manager of Latin America at Carlson Wagonlit Travel.

Hogg Robinson Group marketing director John Harvey said the agency has not noticed a change in corporate travel patterns but added, "The level of alert, especially for businesswomen, is increasing." BCD Travel also has not seen a big impact on travel patterns, said BCD Travel global crisis management vice president Martin Weisskirchen.

Zika virus can bring on symptoms similar to the flu in one in five people and has been in Brazil since May 2015, according to the Pan American Health Organization. Recently, however, researchers have suggested an apparent link between the virus and Guillain-Barré syndrome, birth defects like microcephaly and poor outcomes for pregnant women. On Feb. 1, the World Health Organization declared Zika a global public health emergency, and authorities have cautioned pregnant women to avoid traveling to affected regions and have advised women within the regions to consider delaying pregnancy until the outbreaks are contained.

American Airlines, JetBlue Airways, United Airlines, Lufthansa and British Airways are among a growing number of air carriers that have recently instituted some form of refund or rebooking policy for travelers flying to affected regions. The hotel industry has yet to take similar broad actions, as companies like Marriott International released statements instead about taking recommended precautions and monitoring the outbreaks through health authorities.

Though it's early and information about the virus and its implications is still emerging, corporates appear to view the pandemic as just another risk of global travel. "For organizations that have a mature process around travel risk management, this should just be another time to exercise that muscle," said Jim Hutton, chief security officer at risk-management firm On Call International. "There are lots of different risks and exposures that happen, crime, terrorism. Health exposures really shouldn't be treated any differently in terms of the duty-of-care mentality."

Weisskirchen said, "We advise travel managers to understand and support their companies' individual risk and duty-of-care policies. ... There's a common thread that all companies share: keeping travelers informed and engaged. Travel security alerts for specific destinations can play an important role for situations like this one, and we also encourage companies to explore the use of customized messaging capabilities."

DHL travel services category manager Michelle Hunt said her travelers have raised no concerns thus far. Instead, the biggest focus for the program currently is disseminating information. "We're creating awareness around it in conjunction with our health, risk and HR departments to make sure people are informed of what's going on and how to protect themselves," she said.

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Hunt said pop-up notifications on the company's online booking tool alert travelers of the situation, no matter where the traveler is planning to book. General communications will also go out via newsletters and direct communications to those with booked travel. Though Hunt said it's important to communicate to all employees about Zika Virus "because anybody could get it," DHL's communications echo health organizations' recommendations that pregnant women or those wanting to become pregnant should check with their doctors before they travel.

What Is Zika Virus?

Though the WHO declared Zika a public health emergency, neither it nor the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or Pan American Health Organization have issued bans on international travel or trade in infected regions.

The virus is not new—it was first discovered in the Zika forest in Uganda in 1947—but since it was confirmed in Brazil in May 2015, the scope of infection has grown quickly throughout the Americas. PAHO said the rapid transmission has been fueled by climatic conditions that allow the carrier, Aedes species mosquitoes, to thrive. Because the virus is also new to the region, the population has not built up natural defenses against infection.

Symptoms associated with Zika include mild fever, rash, conjunctivitis and muscle or joint pain, though symptoms do not appear in all infected people. On Call International chief medical officer Dr. Robert Wheeler said the incubation period can be three to 12 days. After that, the virus can be detected in the blood and the person is infectious for three to seven days. This, he said, is also the period in which symptoms appear, if they appear at all. Once an infected person develops antibodies against the virus, they are no longer infectious and are extremely unlikely to contract the virus again.

Given the time span from inoculation to no longer infectious, Dr. Wheeler said common advice for women is to avoid getting pregnant within four weeks of travel to infected regions. Men, too, should be aware that they could infect partners through sexual contact during the same period. So far, no locally transmitted Zika cases have been found in the continental United States, though cases in returning travelers have been reported and the list of countries with active transmission changes regularly.

"What's important is that our corporate customers keep an eye on where their travelers are going," said CWT's Fernandez. "Companies tell us that safety and security are key in managing their travel program and I think they just need to continue doing that, and we will support them accordingly."

Hutton also suggested corporates exercise flexibility for those employees concerned about traveling. "There are other ways to do the business," he said. "You can perhaps do video collaboration. There

could be local partners that could do some things for you. I would encourage an organization to be creative around ways to get the work done. There's really no one size fits all here."