What is Zika virus and how does it spread?
Zika virus is a type of Flavivirus. More commonly known members of this family of viruses include West Nile virus, yellow fever virus and dengue virus. Each of these viruses is most commonly spread through the bite of an infected mosquito.

Zika virus is spread by the *Aedes* species of mosquitoes, and unlike many other mosquitoes, this type typically bites during the daytime when people are also most active. Mosquitoes become infected after biting an infected person, and then they spread the virus to another person when they bite again.

At this time, other ways that Zika virus spreads are still being fully understood. We know transmission occurs from mother to fetus during pregnancy. In addition, transmission through sexual contact has been documented. Zika can be passed via sex from an infected person to his or her partners regardless of whether the infected person has symptoms or not.

How long Zika remains in the semen and vaginal fluids of an infected person is still being investigated. This information will allow public health officials to determine the period of time during which an infected person can spread Zika to their sexual partners. Other potential modes of transmission, such as through blood transfusions, have not been confirmed.

What are the symptoms of Zika virus?
Many people with Zika virus will not develop symptoms or will only experience mild symptoms, such as fever, rash, joint pain or conjunctivitis (pink eye). Other symptoms could include muscle pain and headache. Symptoms typically last several days to a week.

Two potential outcomes of Zika virus infection have been worrisome:

- **Congenital Zika syndrome** – a group of birth defects in babies whose mothers were infected with Zika during pregnancy. Babies may have one or more of the following:
  - Microcephaly – a condition in which an infant is born with a significantly smaller head size compared with other infants of the same age and gender. Often, this condition indicates a smaller than normal or underdeveloped brain.
  - Damage to the brain, eyes, ears or throat
  - Seizures
  - Joints with limited range of motion
  - Increased muscle tone causing restrictive body movement
- **Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS)** – a condition characterized by weakened muscles and sometimes paralysis, GBS typically resolves after a few weeks. However, the condition is alarming and some people experience permanent nerve damage. Current research indicates GBS is strongly associated with Zika, but only a small number of those infected with Zika get GBS.
Why is Zika virus causing infections now?
Zika virus was first identified in Africa in 1947, with the first human cases diagnosed in 1952. Because the symptoms of Zika virus are typically minor and are similar to some other mosquito-borne infections, it is likely that the number of cases diagnosed is only a small percentage of those that have occurred. However, Zika virus seems to be spreading more rapidly for reasons that remain uncertain, but are likely due at least in part to increased international travel.

Who is at risk?
Anyone who lives in or travels to an area where Zika virus has been found and who has not previously been infected with Zika virus can be infected. Once a person has been infected with Zika virus, he or she is likely to be protected from future infections.

Adults are more likely to require medical attention for Zika virus infections, and unborn babies of pregnant women are considered to be at greater risk because of the link between infection during pregnancy and birth defects. For this reason, pregnant women are advised not to travel to areas with Zika outbreaks, prevent mosquito bites if they are in an area with Zika, and abstain from sex or have protected sex with partners who may be infected with Zika.

Is there a Zika vaccine?
No. A vaccine is not available to protect against Zika virus. But because Zika virus is a flavivirus, and two flavivirus vaccines exist (yellow fever and dengue), the hope is that a path to a Zika vaccine will be a straight one.

How can my family stay healthy?
For people who live in or plan to travel to areas where Zika virus is present, the best way to prevent infection is to avoid mosquito bites. You can protect yourself by wearing long pants and long-sleeved shirts and using insect repellants approved by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). You can also eliminate standing water to prevent mosquitoes from breeding. The CDC currently recommends that pregnant women avoid travel to countries where Zika virus has been detected and use protection during each sexual encounter with a partner who has recently been to an area where Zika virus is present.

You can stay up to date on the situation with Zika virus by visiting these websites:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – cdc.gov/zika
- World Health Organization (WHO) – who.int/emergencies/zika-virus/en