



Emergency Preparedness

Avoiding the Spread of Zika and Other Diseases in the Workplace

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What You Need to Know

Zika arrived in Florida, but there are ways to avoid exposure.

A safety expert walks through keeping your workplace safe.

Additional tips for avoiding diseases and pathogens.

Here's how to stop Zika and other diseases from invading work.

Outdoor worksites come with a number of safety hurdles, but one of the less obvious health risks to workers may lie in pools of standing water, especially when clearing land.

Standing water, including decomposing sewage or other forms of contaminated water, can host a number of bacteria and viruses, including: E. coli, salmonella, cholera, hepatitis and norovirus. Water also attracts mosquitoes, which can carry the Zika virus.

U.S. health care officials are carefully monitoring the spread of Zika, which has affected people in South America, Mexico, the Caribbean and now **Florida**.

Once someone is bitten by an infected mosquito, Zika virus transmission can occur through sexual contact. Pregnant women may also pass on the virus to their unborn child, increasing the baby's risk for a severe physical deformity called microcephaly.

That's why no matter who is working at a construction site and when, it's critical to take certain precautions to not just protect workers, but to also protect their loved ones, explains Frank Quarato, a workplace safety training expert for the Center for Safety and Environmental Management.

How to Fight the Zika Virus

"If possible, always make the site dry first," says Quarato. "Then, prioritize the exposures because there's always going to be risk when there's water. Consider the probability of a bulldozer getting

splashed versus who is on the ground moving items around. We tell workers to 'REC' a site, which stands for recognition, evaluation and control. Recognize signs and symptoms, and know the history of the site where you're working. Evaluate the probability of an event versus the severity of an event. And have engineering or management controls in place to reduce risk."

These types of controls can be as simple as a bulldozer operator keeping doors and windows of the cab closed while moving soil, or having policies in place to ensure all workers on the ground are wearing appropriate clothing from head to toe as well as protective bug spray.

Workers and safety professionals are also advised to keep current on Zika migration patterns, to know if Zika has been identified in their state, and to be aware that seasons influence mosquito activity. There are fewer in winter, for example.

Fighting Pathogens with Hygiene and First Aid

While Zika made major news headlines, there are many more lesser-known pathogens workers need to keep top of mind to reduce the risk of exposure. Quarato says the top workplace infections include: cholera, salmonella, viral hepatitis, methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), *E. coli*, Ebola, meningococcal meningitis, HIV, HPV and, yes, the flu. Influenza is usually perceived as only a wintertime threat, but actually flu begins as early as October and can last into May. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention posts a *yearly calendar* of flu season.

What may be surprising is that the risk of many of these infections can be greatly decreased by practicing simple hand hygiene—in any occupation. "Underneath dirty fingernails is a lot of debris, and then you're handling equipment or touching your face, and that's how bacteria and viruses get around so quickly," says Quarato. "Clean hands are critical. Antibacterial soap can destroy good flora, but basic soap and warm water kill a lot of bugs."

It's also important to keep first-aid kits handy, whether working outdoors at a site, indoors at a desk or on an assembly line. A cut or more serious injury at work could expose workers to bloodborne pathogens. While HIV and HPV usually occur through sexual transmission, any contact with blood should be a concern. Putting pressure on any wound quickly to lower the risk of exposure to these infections is a key to workplace safety.

"These aren't things people often think about until they happen," Quarato says, "but simple steps such as keeping a first-aid kit nearby, remembering hand hygiene and having policies and on-site practices in place that everyone has to follow can go a long way in making sure workers don't get sick."

Key Takeaways

- Don't wait until there's an issue to assess your workplace for disease concerns.
- Always keep a stocked first-aid kit nearby.
- Stay up to date on current diseases and their causes.

What other diseases are you concerned about on your job?