

TRAVEL INTELHEALTH

Zika May Be Coming to New York City

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Getty

The *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which can carry the Zika virus.

A cousin of the Zika virus-carrying *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, called *Aedes albopictus*, is currently in New York City and could transmit the virus. But there's no need to cancel your trip yet.

As the weather heats up, mosquito season will soon be in full swing in [New York City](#). While most people in the area have typically thought of mosquitoes as nothing more than an

annoyance, this year, the threat of [Zika](#)—a mosquito-born disease that is quickly making its way through Latin America and the [Caribbean](#)—has both residents and those planning to visit worried about a possible outbreak. The major question: Are those fears warranted?

Yes and no, say experts. The *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which can [spread the Zika virus](#) by biting humans and infecting the blood stream, has not yet made its way to New York City—and it may never get there. “We have 15 years worth of data and we have never found *Aedes aegypti* in the city,” Mary T. Bassett, M.D., MPH, health commissioner for the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, tells *Condé Nast Traveler*. This is reassuring, but [research](#) from mosquito and disease experts at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) projects that the warmer-than-usual temperatures predicted for this summer could mean the *Aedes aegypti* will travel as far north as the Big Apple.

Even more concerning is that a cousin of the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, called *Aedes albopictus*, currently resides in New York City and has the ability to transmit the Zika virus, says Andrew Monaghan, Ph.D., a scientist at NCAR. (This species also happens to spread dengue, chikungunya, and yellow fever.) At this point, NYC-bred *Aedes albopictus* mosquitoes are not infected with Zika, but if a local *Aedes albopictus* were to bite a Zika-infected person in the city (say, someone who had recently picked up the virus in Latin America), that mosquito—in its short lifetime—could then bite and infect others in its vicinity. In a city of more than 8 million people living and working in close proximity, and where tourists from all over the world travel each summer, that mode of disease transmission is a considerable threat.

Additionally, there's the inconvenient fact that being bit by a Zika-carrying mosquito isn't the only way to contract the virus. It can also be [transmitted sexually](#), so if an infected person

returns or travels to the city and transmits the virus to a partner, that partner could also have the ability to pass Zika on to a hungry *Aedes albopictus* mosquito, if bit.

There is some good news: “*Aedes albopictus* has been known to transmit Zika virus during past outbreaks... [But] it isn’t known to be playing a role in ongoing transmission in the Americas,” says Monaghan. However, he adds, “it is not yet clear whether *Aedes albopictus* will play a role in Zika virus transmission in the Americas in the future. If that happens, New York City would likely be at greater risk for local virus transmission.”

In other words, there is reason to be on alert, and New York City is taking major precautions to protect everyone who lives in the city and visits this summer. So whether you’ll be flying in for a week, or [splitting your summer](#) between Manhattan and the Hamptons, here’s what you need to know.

There is reason to be on alert

After the World Health Organization upped its warnings about Zika outbreaks earlier this year, New York City’s Health Department began developing a comprehensive Zika Action Plan in collaboration with the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the city’s Office of Emergency Management. In April, the city [announced](#) that it is investing \$21 million over a three-year period (including a New York State match), that will add more than 50 Zika-related positions to the department—including inspectors, exterminators, and lab analysts—and it will double the number of mosquito traps placed across the city to about 120. These traps will specifically attract *Aedes* mosquitoes and will

be placed around the five boroughs in areas where the bugs tend to congregate, such as green spaces and marshes.

What's more, the city already has a successful West Nile virus control infrastructure in place, and it is using that as a starting point to build Zika control systems. "We don't need people to become alarmed that Zika is making a march into New York City; that would be unfair," says Dr. Bassett. But she acknowledges that "we will have a much more robust surveillance system" to offset any eventuality. As part of its plan, the Health Department will monitor *Aedes* mosquito populations weekly, and will aggressively target areas of the city with higher numbers of *Aedes* mosquitoes. The plan will focus on eliminating breeding grounds (such as standing water), larviciding (killing mosquitoes during their larval life stage), and adulticiding (killing adult mosquitoes).

Of course, everyone in the city should take precautions as well. While you're not likely to be bombarded by insects on Fifth Avenue outside of Tiffany's, you are at increased risk of mosquito bites in places like Central Park, where there are grassy areas, as well as anywhere there is standing water. So even though the city is upping its prevention efforts, health officials advise everyone to wear mosquito repellent (check out the Environmental Protection Agency's [guide](#) on repellents) and long sleeves and pants as much as possible when in vulnerable areas.

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Be especially vigilant during the day. "The thing to know about these *Aedes* mosquitoes is that they're aggressive daytime biters, so if you do get bitten in the daytime—and it's a painful

bite usually—talk to your health care provider," says Chloe Demrovsky, executive director at Disaster Recovery Institute.

Also, do your part to eliminate mosquito breeding zones around you. "These mosquitoes are like cockroaches in that they're good at adapting and they are very hardy," says Demrovsky. "They can breed in as little as a tablespoon of water, so after it rains, dump out standing water around your home." Also keep screens closed tight, and if you have air conditioning, keep windows and doors shut to make sure mosquitoes stay out.

Before traveling, check the CDC's [travel updates](#) to find out about the level of disease outbreaks at your destination. And no matter where you are, monitor yourself. If you're showing symptoms of Zika, which typically show up within a week or two after being bit by an infected mosquito and include fever, rash, joint pain, and red eyes, see your health care provider to get tested, says Dr. Bassett. This is particularly important for pregnant women, because Zika is linked to an increased risk of microcephaly, a birth defect that results in a small head, among other complications. The virus has also been linked to an increased [risk of Guillain-Barré syndrome](#), an autoimmune disease that causes paralysis, so see your doctor quickly if you suspect you've been infected.

Zika symptoms usually last for about a week—though [most people infected with Zika don't show symptoms](#)—and it's during that time when infected people are most likely to spread the virus, via mosquitoes that bite them and through sexual contact. Also note that it's unclear how long the virus remains in semen, so it's crucial to use condoms to prevent transmission.

Even given all of these warnings, health officials stress that there's no reason to panic. At this time, there have been no reported Zika transmissions in New York City, and officials are

encouraging both residents and visitors to enjoy the city this summer.