

As Athlete Reveals Zika Infection, Others May Skip Olympics



By Erik Lief — June 2, 2016



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While the ongoing issue for many world-class athletes -- specifically, whether to participate in the upcoming Olympics -- comes into sharper focus, we keep hearing more from those who are unsettled by the idea of heading into Brazil's Zika virus hot zone.

Considering what's still unknown about Zika, a virus that can arise from the bite of an infected mosquito, or by being sexually transmitted, and the recent disclosure by a Major League Baseball pitcher that he's contracted it -- the drumbeat for athletes to potentially skip the Summer Games is getting ever louder.

On Tuesday, Francisco Rodriguez, a relief pitcher for the Detroit Tigers, revealed that he was infected with the virus in his native Venezuela during the offseason. Zika can cause neurological problems in adults and severe birth defects in newborns. And his advice to other potential Olympic athletes is that they should be concerned, while arming themselves with information.

"If they have plans to have kids in the future, you've got to think about it," the 34-year-old righthander told [ESPN.com](#) [2]. "You have to be aware of that as well. You have to do some homework, some research about it."

For those planning to travel to Rio de Janeiro in August, adding to one's base of knowledge has just become more important following last weekend's news from the World Health Organization, which rejected a plea from roughly 150 public health experts and scientists calling for the Olympics to be rescheduled.



Rio de Janeiro via [Shutterstock](#)

[1]

This message, part of an online letter from doctors and scientists, is clear: "An unnecessary risk is posed when 500,000 foreign tourists from all countries attend the Games, potentially acquire that strain, and return home to places where it can become endemic."

But in reaching its decision, the WHO issued a statement saying that, "[b]ased on the current assessment of Zika virus circulating in almost 60 countries globally and 39 in the Americas, there is no public health justification for postponing or cancelling the games."

Rodriguez's admission follows concern expressed by athletes from different sports: Pau Gasol, a Spaniard who plays for the NBA's Chicago Bulls; American tennis star Serena Williams; and Australian golfer Adam Scott.

"I'm thinking about (whether or not to go)," Gasol said Monday, as reported by *The Wall Street Journal*. "Just like every athlete, or any other person considering going to Rio, should be thinking about it." According to the newspaper, Gasol indicated that "other Spanish athletes have also expressed their concerns about the virus and are also considering skipping the games."

"It wouldn't surprise me to see some athletes deciding not to participate in the games," added the Bulls center, "to avoid putting their health and the health of their families at risk."

Meanwhile, Williams, when asked Saturday about the health issue, the world's No. 1 female player said she would look to become "super protected" while in Rio, but was unsure how exactly to accomplish that. In addition, [according to USA Today](#) [3], "[m]embers of the U.S. women's soccer team have expressed concern over attending the Games because of Zika, as has golfer Rory McIlroy."

For athletes and tourists who decide to attend the Games, that decision should be accompanied with a strong resolve to protect both one's self and others from potential infection. Here are some ways to achieve this, excerpted from UpToDate, a [comprehensive medical website](#) [4], which includes an overview of the Zika virus.

- "Preventing mosquito bites by wearing long sleeves and long pants, using insect repellent, and staying indoors as feasible (with air conditioning, window/door screens, and/or mosquito nets to minimize contact between mosquitoes and people)."
- "It is prudent for individuals with Zika virus infection/exposure to abstain from sexual activity (vaginal, anal, and oral sex) or use barrier protection (ideally condoms) while active mosquito transmission persists."
- "Men who have a pregnant partner should abstain from unprotected sex for the duration of the pregnancy."

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[1] <http://www.shutterstock.com>

[2] http://espn.go.com/mlb/story/_/id/15863009/francisco-rodriguez-detroit-tigers-says-battled-zika-virus-offseason

[3] <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/tennis/2016/05/28/serena-williams-rio-summer-olympics-zika-virus/85090386/>

[4] http://www.uptodate.com/contents/zika-virus-infection-an-overview?source=search_result&search=Zika+virus+infection+%28The+Basics%29&selectedTitle=1%7E150