

OPENING STATEMENT
Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
“The Science of Zika: The DNA of an Epidemic”
May 25, 2016

Thank you, Mister Chairman for holding this hearing. This morning we are talking about the Zika virus—something that has been in the news a lot lately and that we have been debating on the House floor.

The most common way that someone becomes infected with the Zika virus is by a mosquito bite. The symptoms of the virus may include fever, rash, joint pain, and red eyes. These symptoms are typically mild and many people who get infected with the Zika virus have no symptoms or do not seek medical treatment.

Although the Zika virus was first identified in the late 1940s, there were no major outbreaks of the Zika virus until 2007. Since then, the Zika virus has been reported in almost 70 countries and territories, including the major Zika outbreak that is happening in Brazil—where more than a million cases have been reported.

In the United States, local transmission of the Zika virus has been reported in several U.S. territories. In particular, Puerto Rico is suffering from a large Zika outbreak in which more than 800 cases have been reported to date.

In the continental United States, the only Zika cases that have been reported involve people who have traveled to places that have a Zika outbreak. But the number of those cases is already more than 500, and there is significant concern that the continental United States will start seeing locally transmitted cases of the Zika virus once we get further into mosquito season.

Even though my home state of Texas only has 35 travel-associated cases of the Zika virus so far, I have been hearing from a lot of concerned constituents about the Zika virus and the potential for a Zika outbreak in Texas this summer.

I would imagine that many of my colleagues on this Committee have been hearing from concerned constituents as well. I am pleased that we will have more information to pass on to them after this hearing.

What is especially troubling about the Zika virus is that it has been associated with several significant health conditions, including birth defects in infants and neurological conditions in adults. Most notably, the Zika virus has been linked to microcephaly—a birth defect where the brain does not develop during pregnancy or after birth. This condition results in significant impairments for the baby and can result in death. Brazil has seen thousands of microcephaly cases.

In the United States, and territories, hundreds of pregnant women who have been infected with the Zika virus are currently being monitored. Unfortunately, last week the first case of microcephaly was reported in Puerto Rico.

Additionally, the Zika virus has been associated with Guillain-Barré syndrome, a disorder where the body's immune system attacks part of the nervous system. People who have Guillain-Barré syndrome usually recover, but the syndrome can result in permanent paralysis or death.

Understandably, people are very concerned about this virus and want more information. That is why I am happy we are holding this hearing to learn more about the science behind this disease and to hear more about the key research questions. For example, how is the virus transmitted from mother to fetus and how is the risk to the fetus related to the timing of the mother's infection? Does Zika cause Guillain-Barré syndrome and if so, is there an intervention that can prevent this terrible condition?

We also need to know where the vector mosquitoes live, the incubation period of the virus in the mosquito, and whether the infected female can transmit the virus to her eggs.

Finally, it is perplexing that the Zika virus was first identified in the late 1940s, but we are only seeing major Zika outbreaks now. What has changed in the last 70 years to make conditions more suitable for the virus to be transmitted?

I imagine that the rapid increase in human travel has played a large role, but I do wonder how much other factors like insecticide resistance and climate change may be playing in the spread of this disease.

All of these research questions need to be answered as we plan effective mosquito control programs and prepare to invest our resources. But traditional mosquito control programs will not be enough. I am looking forward to hearing from our expert witnesses on how emerging technologies that use advanced genetics and biologic technologies could help control the Zika virus.

It is also important to note that to support the necessary research, surveillance, mosquito control, and drug and vaccine development programs that will be needed to control this disease, we must ensure that adequate funding is provided. I am hopeful that Congress can come together to provide that funding. Time is of the essence.

In closing, I want to thank the expert witnesses for being here today, and I yield back the balance of my time.