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Zika: Rise in Abortion Requests Linked to Countries' Warnings

Marcia Frellick

June 23, 2016

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related to the Zika virus.

Numbers Doubled in Three Countries

The researchers found a significant increase in requests to WoW from seven of eight countries that had active Zika transmission, a government warning, and legal restrictions on abortions. Requests to WoW more than doubled in Brazil and Ecuador (both saw a 108% increase) and almost doubled in Venezuela (93.3%), and increased by more than a third in most of the other countries (Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Honduras). Only Jamaica did not show an increase among this group.

In contrast, the researchers saw no significant increase in requests from countries that had active Zika transmission and restrictions on abortion, but no national pregnancy advisory (Bolivia, Dominican

Health warnings about the Zika virus significantly increased demand for abortions in Latin American countries, according to a study [published online](#) June 22 in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

On November 17, 2015, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) issued a Zika alert in Latin America, and then several countries issued their own health alerts, including warnings to avoid pregnancy, cautions about microcephaly, and declarations of national emergency.

However, abortion is illegal or highly restricted in many Latin American countries, which leaves women with few options. One option is Women on Web (WoW), a nonprofit that provides access to abortion medications (mifepristone [also known as RU-486] and misoprostol) through online telemedicine in countries where safe abortion is not universally available.

To determine what, if any, effect the Zika warnings are having on requests for abortion medications, Abigail R. A. Aiken, MD, PhD, from the University of Texas at Austin, and colleagues analyzed WoW requests between January 1, 2010, and March 2, 2016, in 19 Latin American countries.

They used a regression-discontinuity design and assessed whether requests for abortion increased after the PAHO alert compared with numbers preannouncement. The authors included three control countries (Chile, Poland, and Uruguay), where researchers expected no increase in abortion requests

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Republic, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Paraguay).

Women were asked in the last weeks of the study whether they were seeking abortion because of concern about Zika infection. In their responses, women did not confirm whether they had received a diagnosis of a Zika infection.

"We cannot definitively attribute the rapid acceleration in requests in [the group where countries both issued health warnings and restrict abortions] to concern about Zika virus exposure," the authors write. "However, the percentage of women in each country who reported such concern as their reason for seeking abortion correlates with the observed country-specific increases in requests over baseline trends."

World Health Organization models predict that 3 million to 4 million people across the Americas (including North America, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean) will contract Zika through early 2017. [Continue Reading](#)

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