



Home / Washington Post / International

http://www.bgdailynews.com/washington_post/international/zika-is-triggering-a-surge-in-demand-for-abortions-across/article_3d6c0fd0-7683-5397-8e6e-c34d8b42a079.html

Zika is triggering a surge in demand for abortions across Latin America, study says

Max Bearak Washington Post 16 hrs ago

Women in Zika-affected countries in Latin America are seeking help getting abortions in unprecedented numbers, according to a study published by the New England Journal of Medicine. The virus can cause birth defects in the babies of women who carry it, but abortions are illegal across much of the affected region. More than 1,500 babies have been born with microcephaly, a condition linked to Zika and typified by a small head and potential developmental problems.

The report derived its findings from information requests sent to a popular website for women seeking abortions, Women on Web. The website offers advice and also mails pregnancy-ending pills to women who can't otherwise get an abortion.

The researchers analyzed information requests from affected countries before and after the virus began spreading, as well as comparing those to countries where Zika hasn't been documented. They found that in Brazil, for instance, requests for abortion advice had doubled since health organizations began issuing grave alerts about the virus in November.

Ecuador and Venezuela saw a similar doubling, while numerous Central American nations saw numbers rise, too, but more modestly. Uruguay and Chile, which haven't had any cases of Zika, did not see any increase.

Abigail Aiken, an assistant professor from the University of Texas at Austin who worked on the study, told the BBC: "Accurate data on the choices pregnant women make in Latin America is hard to obtain. If anything, our approach may underestimate the impact of health warning on requests for abortion, as many women may have used an unsafe method or visited local underground providers."

Many women affected by Zika may not have access to the Internet and could not possibly be accounted for in the study.



In Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador, abortions are illegal except in cases of health emergencies or rape. In Ecuador, that only applies to women who are mentally ill and who have been raped. In El Salvador, abortion is totally illegal, and women can serve jail time if convicted of having one.

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