The risk of babies born with microcephaly has raised understandable concerns among women including those who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant. There are many unknowns regarding the possible causes of microcephaly. Until we have more answers, there are ways that women can protect themselves from Zika infection.

Should pregnant women be concerned about Zika virus disease?

Although symptoms associated with Zika are generally mild, a possible association has been observed between the unusual rise of Zika cases and microcephaly cases in Brazil since 2015.

What is microcephaly?

Microcephaly is a condition where a baby is born with a small head or the head stops growing after birth. Microcephaly is usually a rare condition, with one baby in several thousand being born with the birth defect. If this combines with poor brain growth, babies with microcephaly can have developmental disabilities.

The most reliable way to assess whether a baby has microcephaly is to measure head circumference 24 hours after birth, compare this with WHO growth standards, and continue to measure the rate of head growth in early infancy. Brazil has reported an unusual, sudden increase in babies born with microcephaly since May 2015.

Information for healthcare providers:

- Preliminary guidance for the surveillance of microcephaly in newborns in settings with risk of Zika virus circulation

Information for the general public:

- Fact sheet: Microcephaly

How can women protect themselves from infection with Zika?

Women who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant should take extra care to protect themselves from the bites of the mosquito that transmits Zika, by:

- using insect repellent: repellents may be applied to exposed skin or to clothing, and should contain DEET. Repellents must be used in strict accordance with the label instructions. They are safe for use by pregnant women;
- wearing clothes (preferably light-coloured) that cover as much of the body as possible;
- using physical barriers such as screens, closed doors and windows;
- sleeping under mosquito nets, especially during the day, when Aedes mosquitoes are most active;
- identifying and eliminating potential mosquito breeding sites, by emptying, cleaning or covering containers that can hold even small amounts of water, such as buckets, flower pots and tyres.

Reports have stated that Zika can be transmitted through sex, is this correct, and if so how can it be avoided?

Zika has been found in human semen, and one research study has described a case where Zika has been transmitted from one person to another through sexual contact. However, more evidence is needed to confirm whether sex commonly transmits the Zika virus.

Until more is known, all men and women living in or returning from an area where Zika is present - especially pregnant women and their partners - should be counselled on the potential risks of sexual transmission and ensure safe sexual practices. These include the correct and consistent use of condoms, one of the most effective methods of protection against all sexually transmitted infections.