

Number of babies born with small heads rises rapidly in Brazil

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Dejailson Arruda holds his daughter, Luiza, at their house in Santa Cruz do Capibaribe, Pernambuco state, Brazil, in December. Luiza was born in October with a rare condition known as microcephaly. Luiza's mother, Angelica Pereira, was infected with the Zika virus after a mosquito bite. AP/Felipe Dana

Something strange is happening in Brazil. Last year thousands of babies were born with unusually small heads. Their minds and bodies may not work normally.

The babies' problem is known as microcephaly. There is nothing doctors can do to help them.

In 2015 nearly 3,000 Brazilian babies were born with microcephaly.

Scientists think they know what is causing the problem.

They believe the cause may be a disease called Zika. A disease is something that makes you sick.

Blame The Mosquitoes

Zika is spread by mosquitoes. The insects bite people and drink their blood.

Zika did not used to be common. Before 2007 only a few people caught it. All of a sudden it is spreading quickly. Scientists want to find out why.

Zika is caused by a virus. A virus is a germ that spreads disease.

Viruses are incredibly tiny. Viruses can mutate, or change, over time. These changes are known as mutations.

Certain mutations help a virus spread. They allow the virus to travel more easily from one person to another.

Scott Weaver studies diseases spread by mosquitos. He thinks the Zika virus has mutated.

Weaver says the change is allowing the virus to grow more. More of the virus is building up in any one drop of blood.

Change Means Faster Spread

The mutation is allowing Zika to spread more quickly. Mosquitoes are now more likely to pick up the virus from someone with the disease. They then pass the virus on to the next person they bite.

Still, no one is sure the Zika virus is causing microcephaly. Scientists still need to prove it is.

Scientists are looking for signs of Zika in babies with microcephaly. They will soon begin studying umbilical cord blood. The umbilical cord connects the mother and unborn child. It is cut at birth.

Clues In Cord Blood

Scientists will look for antibodies within the cord blood. Our bodies make antibodies to fight off harmful viruses and other germs. The antibodies try to kill the germs. If they can, the body gets better.

Each kind of antibody is different. Each fights against a particular virus. If scientists spot Zika antibodies, it will mean the Zika virus was there.

Scientists may soon prove Zika is causing the problem. If they do, they will move on to the next step. They will try to quickly come up with a Zika vaccine. A vaccine helps the body make more antibodies.

Quiz

- 1 Read the sentence from the section "Change Means Faster Spread".

Mosquitos are now more likely to pick up the virus from someone with the disease.

What does the phrase "pick up" mean in the sentence?

- (A) lift
- (B) receive
- (C) improve
- (D) understand

- 2 Read the sentence from the section "Clues In Cord Blood".

If scientists spot Zika antibodies, it will mean the Zika virus was there.

Which word is CLOSEST in meaning to the word "spot" as used in the sentence?

- (A) locate
- (B) study
- (C) produce
- (D) handle

- 3 What is the purpose of the section "Blame the Mosquitoes"?

- (A) to provide information about different types of mosquitoes
- (B) to explain how mosquitos spread the disease called Zika
- (C) to tell when a man named Scott Weaver first discovered the Zika virus
- (D) to prove that viruses are difficult to see

- 4 Based on the section "Clues In Cord Blood," what are the clues in cord blood?

- (A) antibodies
- (B) viruses
- (C) germs
- (D) vaccines