

## Should the 2016 Olympics Be Canceled Because of Zika?

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Condé Nast Traveler, June 15, 2016



Alamy

The Olympics will cost Brazil more than \$13 billion.

Brazil faces the question it doesn't want to hear.

This article has been updated with new information.

Despite noting that the World Health Organization is increasingly concerned about the Zika virus, WHO chief Dr. Margaret Chan maintained that there is no reason the 2016 Summer Olympics—which are expected to draw an anticipated 500,000 people to Brazil—should be moved, canceled, or postponed from Rio de Janeiro. "The more we learn about Zika, the more worried we get about it," said Chan at the World Health Assembly, adding that she herself would be attending the games. "But you don't want to bring a standstill to the world's movement of people. This is all about risk assessment and risk management."

But according to new survey data from Allianz Global Assistance, a travel insurance provider, Americans are thinking about the Olympics a little differently than Dr. Chan.

Nearly half of Americans surveyed (49 percent) think that the Rio Olympics should in fact be delayed or canceled because of the virus. The survey also found that 71 percent of Americans are not interested in traveling to Rio or Brazil, with 82 percent saying that Zika has some impact on whether they take the trip: 42 percent would definitely not go because of the virus, 23 percent are less interested in going, and only 18 percent would go, but would be worried about Zika during their travels.

The virus, which has now spread to 60 countries and can also be transmitted through sex, was in February declared a global health emergency. In April, the Centers for Disease Control determined that despite earlier theories, the virus does, indeed, cause microcephaly and other birth defects. Experts concerned about the Olympics and calling for their delay or cancellation have said the influx of people in Brazil could potentially accelerate the virus's spread around the world, and spark even more outbreaks. Brazil, for its part, has refused to entertain the possibility.

The original post continues below.

2/4/2016: In recent months, the Zika virus has spread rapidly and explosively, leading to travel alerts for more than 20 countries and territories, confirmation that the virus can be spread sexually, and the World Health Organization's classification of the virus—and its associated health risks—as a global health emergency. Throughout it all, Brazil, a country at the epicenter of the virus, has wrestled with clumsy vaccine testing and overrun hospitals, battled public perception, and faced the inevitable, tough-to-avoid question it doesn't want to even consider: Should the 2016 Summer Olympics be canceled?

In the midst of economic struggles and claims of a corrupt government, the Olympics, slated to begin in Rio de Janeiro on August 5, were expected to give a much-needed lift to the country. Hoping to attract more Olympic-goers (and to entice travelers to spend more time in Brazil) the government even temporarily waived visa requirements for travelers in the country from June 1 through September 18. Yet the Zika virus—and the fear of it—quickly spread, leading to a price drop in fares to the South American nation and a rise in the number of questions. Both Brazilian and foreign athletes expected to compete at the games have voiced their concerns. Kipchoge Keino, the head of Kenya's Olympics committee, said the country wouldn't risk sending its athletes to Brazil if the virus reaches "epidemic levels."

The Brazilian government has remained steadfast in its assurance that the virus will not affect the Olympics, which will cost them more than \$13 billion. Federal troops are spraying for mosquitos across the country, officials are reportedly performing daily inspections of Olympic facilities, and neighborhood health inspectors have been tasked with identifying—and eliminating—standing bodies of water where the mosquitoes are known to breed. Given recent confirmation that the virus can spread through sex, health officials say condoms will be available at Carnival venues and health outposts around the city. Yet despite World Health Organization chief Dr. Margaret Chan noting that the agency is increasingly concerned about the virus, the possibility of cancellation has been met with almost uniform dismissal. "This has

never been mentioned. No way," said Rio spokesman Mario Andrada earlier this year. "It's impossible to do that. There is no reason to do that." Recently impeached Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff's former chief of staff, Jaques Wagner, has been as resolute in the past. "We have to explain to those coming to Brazil, the athletes, that there is zero risk if you are not a pregnant women," he told reporters.

But Brazil has also been criticized for its lack of transparency, and for not sharing significant samples and data to determine whether the virus is responsible for the increase in the number of babies born with microcephaly, a rare neurological condition. The lack of information, U.N. and U.S. health officials say, has hindered efforts to provide diagnostic testing, and hampered the development of drugs and vaccines. Residents of the 66 percent of Rio homes whose sewage goes currently untreated have also said they are not hopeful that preventative measures are actually being implemented—or will even work. Community organizer José Martins, from the low-income area of Rocinha, which has some 100,000 people, said he has seen no measures from health officials to do what they said they would—e.g. eliminate standing water and open sewage. "For decades, we have been advocating for improvements in sanitation as the number one priority for public investments here, while the government has insisted on flashier interventions that do not save money on healthcare costs down the line," he said.

Thus far, the International Olympic Committee has echoed Brazil's sentiment. Committee president Thomas Bach said he is "very confident" in the steps taken to address the outbreak. In the unlikely event the IOC should decide to cancel the Olympics, it would be the sixth time in history the Games have been scrapped, and the only time in history they've been changed because of health reasons—previous dates in 1916 (Berlin), 1940 (Tokyo and Sapporo), and 1944 (London and Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy) were all canned because of international wars.

Regardless of whether or not Brazil will actually move forward with the Olympics, travel to the country will no doubt be affected: According to data from the World Bank, countries where the virus has been confirmed or where it is expected to spread—the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico, and parts of South America—are at risk of losing some \$63.9 billion in international tourism. Stan Sandberg, co-founder of [TravellInsurance.com](http://TravellInsurance.com), a trip insurance comparison website, told *Condé Nast Traveler* he's seen a significant increase in traffic this past week, and adds that the site has been fielding customer inquiries about the virus primarily as it relates to trip cancellation coverage. "We've been seeing a large number of first-time travel insurance buyers who might not have considered it in the past," says Sandberg.

Travelers have seen a rush of flexibility in the wake of the virus, and several major airlines and cruise lines have all offered fee-waived cancellations and alterations: Lufthansa said pregnant passengers and their companions can rebook a flight to any of the affected countries free of charge; United Airlines has a similar policy, offering passengers "who are traveling to the affected regions the opportunity to rebook at a later date or receive a full refund."