

Frequently asked questions about Chikungunya

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What is chikungunya?

Chikungunya is a virus that causes high fever, headache, and joint and muscle pain, usually three or seven days after being bitten by an infected mosquito. Although most patients tend to feel better in the following days or weeks, some people suffer from joint pain and stiffness intermittently for months.

The disease rarely causes death, but joint pain can last for months or even years. Complications are most frequent in children under 1 and in persons over 65, especially those with chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. There is no specific treatment for the virus, nor any available vaccine to prevent infection.

The virus was first detected in Tanzania in 1952. Since 2004, intense and widespread outbreaks have been reported in Africa, islands of the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific region, including Australia and south-east Asia (India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Thailand). In 2007 the virus spread to the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy, where an outbreak was transmitted by *Aedes albopictus*. Recent outbreaks of chikungunya have had a significant impact on health services.

How is it transmitted?

The virus is transmitted by the bite of infested mosquitoes such as *Aedes aegypti* (which can also transmit dengue and yellow fever, and is present in the tropical and sub-tropical areas of the Americas) and *Ae. albopictus* (which is found in more temperate areas, from the east coast and southeast of the United States to the northern provinces of Argentina).

Mosquitoes become infected when they feed on a person who has the virus: once infected, the mosquito can infect the next person it bites. Outbreaks occur when a large number of mosquitoes and humans are infected.

What does “indigenous transmission” mean?

Indigenous transmission means that the mosquito populations in a specific area are infected with the virus and begin transmitting it to people in the same area. In cases of indigenous transmission, patients have no history of travel to endemic areas.

In the Americas, to date, the people who have contracted the disease are considered “imported” cases, meaning they were bitten by infected mosquitoes while visiting Asia or Africa, where the virus is present.

What is the risk of it spreading to other countries in the Region?

The risk depends on various factors, most importantly the presence of the *Aedes app.* mosquito, which transmits the chikungunya virus. At present, it is not possible to estimate the risk for other countries of the Region, but the possibility that the virus could spread requires us to be alert and to have surveillance measures in place.

What is the difference between dengue and chikungunya?

They are two different viruses. Chikungunya causes more intense pain in the joints and tendons. The onset of fever is more acute and does not last as long; on very rare occasions, severe hemorrhaging occurs. Dengue not only causes high fever but also very intense headaches, pain behind the eyeballs, muscle and joint pain, nausea, vomiting, enlargement of lymph nodes, and rashes. Severe dengue involves potentially fatal complications, which can include difficult breathing and severe hemorrhaging.

What measures should be taken to prevent chikungunya?

The elimination and control of *Ae. aegypti* mosquito breeding sites reduces the likelihood of the chikungunya virus becoming established and of dengue spreading.

Like dengue, the chikungunya virus requires a comprehensive response that involves action on several fronts, from health care to education and the environment. The following measures are aimed at eliminating or destroying mosquito breeding sites:

- Avoid storing water in outdoor containers (flower pots, bottles, containers that can accumulate water) in order

to prevent them from becoming mosquito breeding sites.

- Cover household water tanks or reservoirs so that mosquitoes do not get in.
- Avoid accumulating garbage; dispose of it in closed plastic bags and keep it in closed containers.
- Uncover/unblock drains to release stagnant water.
- Install mesh/mosquito nets in windows and doors to help reduce contact between mosquitoes and people.

What can I do to protect myself if am I traveling where the virus is present?

When traveling to a country that has the chikungunya virus, follow these recommendations to prevent mosquito bites and reduce the risk of infection:

- Cover exposed skin with long-sleeved shirts, trousers, and hats.
- Use and reapply repellent as indicated.
- Sleep in places protected by mosquito nets.

What is PAHO/WHO doing?

PAHO/WHO is working with the countries of the Region and has developed [preparedness and response guidelines](#) for the possible introduction of the virus. a Given the presence of the transmitting mosquito and the movement of people around the world, there is a risk that chikungunya will spread.

PAHO/WHO recommends that countries that have the transmitting mosquito should establish and maintain their ability to detect and confirm cases, care for patients, and implement an effective public communication strategy to reduce the presence of the mosquito. Countries are also recommended to strengthen the capacity of their laboratories to detect and confirm the virus in a timely manner.

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