ZIKA LATEST: AIRLINES OFFER REFUNDS TO PREGNANT PASSENGERS

News / Airlines

Travellers worried about the implications of flying to Latin America amid growing concerns about the Zika virus should be able to amend their travel plans without expense – as airlines and holiday firms acknowledge the threat from the mosquito-borne infection.

The World Health Organization (WHO) this week declared a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” regarding the virus, and warned that it could affect up to four million people in the Americas. Its epicentres are Brazil and Ecuador, but cases have also been reported in Mexico, Barbados, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Cape Verde.

While the WHO has also stated that there “should be no restrictions on travel or trade with countries, areas and/or territories with Zika virus transmission”, tourists who are pregnant and who wish to alter their travel arrangements should be able to do so for free if they act quickly.

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• Zika virus: medical advice for travellers

The Zika virus is mainly an issue for pregnant travellers, as, while it causes flu-like symptoms of fever and headaches in adults and children, it can be devastating for the human foetus – leading to babies born with defects that include abnormally small heads.

The majority of the big airlines have been united in their response to this threat – with British Airways allowing passengers a month-long window to reorder their travel plans.

A spokesperson for British Airways says: “If a pregnant customer is due to travel up to and including February 29, but they no longer wish to travel, they can change their booking free of charge, and delay their journey or amend to an alternative destination.”

“This applies to flights to Brazil, Mexico, Barbados and the Dominican Republic.”

• Brazil issues Olympics warning as WHO declares Zika emergency

This advice includes flights booked with affiliate airline Iberia.

Virgin Atlantic is taking a similar line, stating that “we are closely monitoring reports of cases of Zika virus in Barbados, Mexico and other destinations in the Caribbean and South America.” The airline is offering refunds to pregnant passengers due to fly to all affected destinations – including countries which it does not fly to directly, but offers connections to, such as Colombia, Panama and the United States territory of Puerto Rico.

Lufthansa has said that pregnant passengers and - unusually - their travelling companion, can alter an existing booking to any of the affected countries for free, stating that “this policy applies to all flights from or to Latin and Central America, and Caribbean countries, from January 28 until March 21 2016. Tickets must be issued on or before January 28 2016.”

This concession also applies to affiliated carriers Austrian Airlines and Swiss.

• Zika outbreak: where is the virus spreading?

Airlines on the other side of the Atlantic have also reacted to the threat from the virus.

United Airlines has stated that “we are offering customers who are travelling to the affected regions the opportunity to rebook at a later date or receive a full refund.”

American Airlines is offering a full refund to pregnant passengers if they are flying to El Salvador, Honduras, Panama or Guatemala.

Delta says that pregnant customers can alter their flights to alternative destinations, change their dates or receive a refund – but “changes need to be made by February 29.”

Holiday companies are also responding to customers’ fears about the health scare – with Thomas Cook saying it will accept changes to existing bookings until the start of May.

“Thomas Cook is currently allowing amendments to an alternative destination for anyone who is pregnant and due to travel on a Thomas Cook charter holiday to the affected areas, up to and including April 30 2016,” a spokesperson says.

“We are contacting all customers due to travel to Mexico, Barbados, the Dominican Republic,

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Jamaica and Cape Verde, up to and including April 30, to advise them of the situation, and offer assistance – prioritising those departing over the next few days."

• Study finds most high-street insect repellents will not protect against the Zika virus

Thomson has outlined a similar strategy, stating that "customers due to travel with us to Mexico, Barbados, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Colombia and Martinique, who would like to amend to an alternative destination, and have a doctor's note confirming their pregnancy, can do so without incurring an amendment fee."

Travel insurance policies should also shield holidaymakers from any costs of having to alter their plans due to the Zika situation – with policies purchased prior to the outbreak likely to offer cover. However, tourists also should check the small print on their policies.

"If one of our customers is currently pregnant and has booked a holiday to Barbados, Bolivia, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Martinique, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Puerto Rico, St Martin, Suriname or Venezuela, they would be eligible to make a cancellation claim – as long as they purchased the policy before January 20," advises Rob Clarkson of Post Office Money Insurance.

However, non-pregnant travellers may find that they are less protected in this scenario.

"If one of our customers is not pregnant then, as the Foreign Office has not advised against travel to this area, there would be no cover for cancellation," Mr Clarkson adds.

"It is important that any customers planning on holidaying in countries with ongoing Zika virus outbreaks do their research before they travel, and take all necessary precautions."

Byron Shirto, chairman of the Latin America Travel Association (www.lata.org), says: "In line with the current recommendations of the Foreign Office and National Health Network and Centre (NHNC), we would advise pregnant travellers to areas where Zika virus outbreaks are currently reported (available via the Pan European Health Organisation) to consult a health professional prior to travel."

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