

1 Title:

2 Maternal antibodies provide partial protection from postnatal Zika viremia in nonhuman  
3 primates

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6 Nicholas J Maness<sup>1,2,\*</sup>, Blake Schouest<sup>2,3</sup>, Anil Singapuri<sup>4</sup>, Maria Dennis<sup>5</sup>, Margaret H.  
7 Gilbert<sup>2</sup>, Rudolf P. Bohm<sup>2</sup>, Faith Schiro<sup>2</sup>, Pyone P. Aye<sup>2</sup>, Kate Baker<sup>2</sup>, Koen K. A. Van  
8 Rompay<sup>4,6</sup>, Andrew A. Lackner<sup>2</sup>, Myrna C. Bonaldo<sup>7</sup>, Robert V. Blair<sup>2</sup>, Sallie R.  
9 Permar<sup>5,8</sup>, Lark L. Coffey<sup>4</sup>, Antonito T. Panganiban<sup>1,2</sup>, Diogo Magnani<sup>9</sup>

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1   <sup>1</sup>Department of Microbiology and Immunology, Tulane University School of Medicine,  
2   New Orleans, Louisiana, USA, nmaness@tulane.edu

3   <sup>2</sup>Tulane National Primate Research Center, Tulane University, Covington, Louisiana,  
4   USA

5   <sup>3</sup>Biomedical Sciences Training Program, Tulane University School of Medicine, New  
6   Orleans, Louisiana, USA

7   <sup>4</sup>Department of Pathology, Microbiology and Immunology, University of California, Davis,  
8   CA, USA

9   <sup>5</sup>Duke Human Vaccine Institute, Duke University Medical Center, Durham North  
10   Carolina, USA

11   <sup>6</sup>California National Primate Research Center, University of California, Davis, California,  
12   USA

13   <sup>7</sup>Laboratório de Biologia Molecular de Flavivírus, Instituto Oswaldo Cruz, Fiocruz, Rio de  
14   Janeiro, RJ, Brazil

15   <sup>8</sup>Department of Molecular Genetics and Microbiology, Duke University Medical Center,  
16   Durham, North Carolina, USA

17   <sup>9</sup>MassBiologics of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Boston,  
18   Massachusetts, USA

19

20   \*Corresponding author, nmaness@tulane.edu

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1    **Abstract**

2    Zika virus (ZIKV) will remain a public health threat until effective vaccines and  
3    therapeutics are made available in the hardest hit areas of the world. Recent data in a  
4    nonhuman primate model showed that infants postnatally infected with ZIKV were  
5    acutely susceptible to high viremia and neurological damage, suggesting the window of  
6    vulnerability extends beyond gestation. We addressed the susceptibility of two infant  
7    rhesus macaques born healthy to dams infected with Zika virus during pregnancy.  
8    Passively acquired neutralizing antibody titers dropped below detection limits between 2  
9    and 3 months of age, while binding, possibly non-neutralizing antibodies remained  
10   detectable until viral infection at 5 months of age. Post-infection acute serum viremia  
11   was substantially reduced relative to adults infected with the same dose of the same  
12   stock of a Brazilian isolate of ZIKV (n=11 pregnant females) and another stock of the  
13   same isolate (n=4 males and 4 non-pregnant females). Virus was never detected in  
14   cerebrospinal fluid nor in neural tissues at necropsy two weeks after infection,  
15   suggesting reduced viral burden relative to adults and published data from infants.  
16   However, viral RNA was detected in lymph nodes, confirming some tissue  
17   dissemination. Though protection was not absolute, our data suggest infants born  
18   healthy to infected mothers may harbor a modest but important level of protection from  
19   postnatally acquired ZIKV for several months after birth, an encouraging result given the  
20   potentially severe infection outcomes of this population.

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1    **Introduction**

2    Zika virus (ZIKV) emerged in Brazil in 2015 and maternal infection during pregnancy was  
3    astutely correlated with an increase in newborns with microcephaly [1, 2], a profound  
4    developmental defect that results in infants with reduced brain size and cognitive  
5    capacity. ZIKV was initially discovered in 1947 in the Zika forest of Uganda during  
6    surveillance for yellow fever virus [3]. Soon thereafter, it became clear that human  
7    infections with ZIKV in that region were not uncommon [4, 5] but disease associated with  
8    infection appeared to be minor and ZIKV became something of an afterthought. The  
9    emergence in Brazil and its association with both major and, more recently, less severe  
10   neurological consequences in congenitally-infected newborns [6], collectively called  
11   “congenital Zika syndrome”, rapidly changed that perception. A profound research effort  
12   was subsequently launched to understand mechanisms of pathogenesis [7, 8], identify  
13   cellular receptors [9-12] and targets [9, 12-16], to develop animal models [17-23], and to  
14   develop and test vaccines [24-29] and therapeutics [23, 30].

15

16   Human brain development continues well after birth [31] so it stands to reason that the  
17   risk of ZIKV associated neurological disease may extend for an unknown period of time  
18   after birth. Indeed, a recent study in nonhuman primate infants showed high peak viral  
19   loads and dissemination into multiple brain regions at two weeks post-infection and  
20   quantifiable neurological defects and cognitive impairment in infants infected in the first  
21   few months of life [32].

22

23   Given the high incidence of ZIKV infection in several South and Central American  
24   countries during the height of the ZIKV epidemic, it is likely that a large number of babies  
25   without congenital infection or disease sequelae were born to infected mothers. The  
26   vulnerability of these infants to newly acquired infection after birth has not been

1 addressed. A recent macaque study showed that fetal infection after subcutaneous  
2 inoculation of dams with ZIKV was efficient, with four of four fetuses showing evidence of  
3 infection [33]. Since not all infants exhibit detectable ZIKV disease when born to infected  
4 mothers, it remains unclear whether these infants remain uninfected and/or unaffected  
5 due to pre-existing passively acquired maternal antibodies, if they mount their own de  
6 novo anti-ZIKV immune responses in utero or soon after birth, or if infection can be  
7 limited and apathogenic for an unknown reason. Addressing these issues will be key to  
8 addressing the susceptibility of newborns to postnatal ZIKV infection in areas with  
9 endemic for ZIKV transmission. During this study, we monitored antiviral antibody  
10 responses after birth in two infant macaques born to ZIKV infected dams and assessed  
11 the level of protection these responses might provide against postnatal infection. Upon  
12 infection at five months of age, both infants showed only modest levels of peripheral  
13 viremia and no virus detected in neurological tissues. These data suggest that being  
14 born to a ZIKV infected mother may confer a small but important level of immunity to  
15 postnatal infection.

16

## 17 **Materials and Methods**

18 *Cohort.* All macaques used in this study were housed at the Tulane National Primate  
19 Research Center (TNPRC), which is fully accredited by AAALAC (Association for the  
20 Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care) International, Animal Welfare  
21 Assurance No. A3180-01. Animals were cared for in accordance with the NRC Guide for  
22 the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals and the Animal Welfare Act. Animal  
23 experiments were approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee  
24 (IACUC) of Tulane University (protocol P0336). Two adult female, purpose bred Indian  
25 rhesus macaques, were identified as pregnant and subsequently assigned to the study.  
26 These macaques were infected with ZIKV during early third trimester. Infants were

1 delivered via caesarian section at approximately gestational day 155 (full term) and  
2 housed in a primate nursery until 5 months of age and then infected with ZIKV  
3 subcutaneously with 10<sup>4</sup> PFU of a Brazilian isolate (Rio-U1/2016 GenBank KU926309),  
4 which was passage twice in Vero cells post-virus isolation. The animals were euthanized  
5 fourteen days later.

6

7 Viral load measurements. Viral RNA was amplified and quantified as described  
8 previously [23]. Briefly, RNA was manually extracted from fluid samples (CSF or blood  
9 serum) using the High Pure Viral RNA Kit (Roche). RNA was then subjected to reverse  
10 transcription and quantitative PCR using primers and a fluorescently conjugated probe  
11 on an Applied Biosystems 7900 instrument.

12

13 Plaque Reduction Neutralization Test (PRNT) 80 measurements. Neutralizing antibody  
14 quantification by plaque reduction neutralization test (PRNT) endpoint 80% PRNT titers  
15 were determined in infant macaque plasma, where each sample was tested in duplicate.  
16 Plasma samples were heated to 56°C for 30 minutes to inactivate complement, serially  
17 2-fold diluted starting at 1:10 (1:20 final virus:plasma dilution) in 150 µl Dulbecco's  
18 Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM) with 2% fetal bovine serum, and then incubated for 1  
19 hour at 37°C with approximately 100 plaque forming units of a 2015 Brazilian ZIKV strain  
20 (SPH2015, GenBank accession number: KU321639.1) from a third Vero cell passage.  
21 After 1 hour, virus-antibody or virus-only mixtures were overlaid on confluent African  
22 Green Monkey Kidney (Vero) cell monolayers and incubated for 1 hour with rocking  
23 every 15 minutes. The plaques developed under 0.5% agar overlays in DMEM were  
24 counted after 7 days under crystal violet staining. Dilutions of plasma that caused a  
25 >80% reduction in the number of plaques, as compared with negative controls (DMEM  
26 only), were considered positive. The reciprocal of the highest dilution of plasma

1 (represented as the mean final virus-serum dilution from both replicates) that inhibited at  
2 least 80% of plaques is reported as the antibody titer.

3

4 Detection of ZIKV-specific IgG in rhesus plasma. High-binding 96-well ELISA plates  
5 (Greiner; Monroe, NC) were coated with 40 ng/well of 4G2 monoclonal antibody,  
6 produced in a mouse hybridoma cell line (D1-4G2-4-15,ATCC; Manassas, VA), diluted  
7 to 0.8 ng/uL in 0.1M carbonate buffer (pH 9.6) and incubated overnight at 4°C. Plates  
8 were blocked in 1X Tris-buffered saline containing 0.05% Tween-20 and 5% normal goat  
9 serum for 1 hour at 37°C, followed by an incubation with diluted ZIKV (strain  
10 PRVABC59, BEI; Manassas, VA) for 1 hour at 37°C. Optimal virus dilution was  
11 determined by whole virion ELISA (WVE) and a 1:5 dilution was used in these assays.  
12 Plasma samples were tested at a dilution of 1:12.5-204,800 in serial 4-fold dilutions and  
13 incubated for 1 hour at 37°C, along with a ZIKV-specific monoclonal antibody, H24 (10  
14 ug/mL), isolated from a ZIKV-infected rhesus macaque. Horseradish peroxidase (HRP)-  
15 conjugated mouse anti-monkey IgG secondary antibody (Southern BioTech;  
16 Birmingham, AL) was used at a 1:4,000 dilution and incubated at 37°C for 1 hour,  
17 followed by the addition of SureBlue Reserve TMB Substrate (KPL; Gaithersburg, MD).  
18 Reactions were stopped by Stop Solution (KPL; Gaithersburg, MD) after a 7-minute  
19 incubation per plate in the dark. Optical density (OD) was detected at 450 nm on a Victor  
20 X Multilabel plate reader (PerkinElmer; Waltham, MA). Binding was considered  
21 detectable if the sample OD value at the lowest dilution was greater than that of the  
22 Background OD, defined as the OD value of the negative control at the lowest dilution  
23 plus 2 x standard deviations (SD). For samples considered positive, their OD values for  
24 the serial dilution were entered into Prism v8 (GraphPad Software; San Diego, CA) to  
25 determine the 50% effective dilution (ED<sub>50</sub>). The ED<sub>50</sub> was calculated by first  
26 transforming the x-axis values, the dilution series 12.5-204,800 4F, into Log<sub>10</sub>. The

1 transformed data was then analyzed using a sigmoidal dose-response nonlinear  
2 regression model. Any sample considered negative was assigned an ED<sub>50</sub> of 12.5, the  
3 lowest dilution tested, because ED<sub>50</sub> cannot be accurately calculated below the lowest  
4 dilution tested. Zika-specific IgG binding was reported in Log<sub>10</sub> ED<sub>50</sub>.

5

6 *Behavioral observations.* We employed a battery of age-appropriate behavioral tests that  
7 are designed for use in infant nonhuman primates. These tests were performed to  
8 identify any effects prenatal exposure to ZIKV. Both infants received neurobehavioral  
9 tests modelled upon testing tools used for human infants [34, 35] and adapted for use in  
10 nonhuman primates [36]. Tests were administered every two weeks, from 14 days of  
11 age until euthanasia at 20 (F10) or 21 weeks (F09). Each infant's scores were compared  
12 descriptively against the mean and standard deviation across seven control animals  
13 reared in the same fashion and tested by the same behavioral technician. Data for  
14 control animals were available at three time points.

15

16 During the first month of life, a Neonatal Behavioral Assessment (NBA) tool was employed.  
17 Scores derived from 47 testing elements grouped for analysis into four categories, clustered  
18 by previous factor analysis [36]: orientation, state control, motor maturity, and activity. After  
19 infants reached 30 days of age, Bayley tests were administered. Scores from 48 testing  
20 elements were grouped for analysis into three categories, cognition, motor abilities, and  
21 temperament state.

22

23

24 **Results**

25

1    Infants born healthy with no evidence of viral infection. Both infants enrolled in this study  
2    were born via caesarean section at full term to dams infected in the third trimester as  
3    part of a previous study [23]. At the time of caesarean section, both dams had cleared  
4    serum virus but one dam exhibited a spike of amniotic fluid virus that remained  
5    detectable at the time of caesarean section (Figure 1A). However, at birth, neither infant  
6    showed evidence of infection as measured in blood or cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) (Figure  
7    1B).

8

9    Despite no direct evidence of infection in the infants, we next assessed the possibility  
10   that infection had occurred *in utero* and induced neurological deficits. To do this, we  
11   used a battery of defined testing parameters to compare the infants with seven control  
12   infants raised in the same manner and tested by the same technician. At 15 days of age,  
13   both infants showed slightly elevated levels of state control, motor maturity and activity  
14   while one infant did not attend to the orientation test (Figure 2A). At 16 and 20 weeks of  
15   age, both infants showed levels of cognitive abilities that were somewhat elevated while  
16   motor development was normal. The temperament of both infants was markedly calmer  
17   than controls (Figure 2B). The small sample size negated any meaningful statistical  
18   analysis. These behavioral observations were exploratory and were designed to identify  
19   any overt abnormalities that might be explored in future studies and none were noted.

20

21   Viral dynamics in the infants. At approximately five months of age (148 days for F10, 155  
22   days for F09), we inoculated both infants with the same dose ( $10^4$  PFU), via the same  
23   subcutaneous route, of the same Brazilian isolate of ZIKV that their dams had been  
24   infected with. Peak viral load in infant F09 was approximately 20,000 viral RNA copies  
25   per milliliter of plasma, which was rapidly and completely cleared by day 5 post infection.  
26   F09 was the only animal in our studies to clear blood viral RNA prior to day 5. In infant

1 F10, the viral load remained below 1,000 copies per milliliter but remained detectable  
2 until day 7 (Figure 3A). These acute viral loads contrast with those of 11 pregnant  
3 females infected with the same stock of the same strain of the virus at the same dose  
4 and route (Figure 3B) as well as four non-pregnant females (Figure 3C) and four adult  
5 males (Figure 3D) infected with a separate stock of the same dose and strain of the  
6 virus. Area under the curve (AUC) analyses showed that F09 had a total viremia lower  
7 than all other animals in our previous studies with the exception of a single pregnant  
8 female that had a slightly lower peak viremia and cleared virus from blood far earlier  
9 than was typical for our pregnant animals. F10 had total viremia far lower than any  
10 animal in any cohort tested at our facilities (Figure 3E). At necropsy, we performed RT  
11 PCR for ZIKV RNA on serum, CSF, multiple brain regions (frontal cortex, parietal lobe,  
12 occipital lobe, temporal lobe, brain stem, optic nerve, cerebellum, choroid plexus, and  
13 subcortical white matter), and axillary lymph nodes and virus was detected only in the  
14 axillary lymph in both animals (Figure 3F). These data contrast sharply from a recent  
15 study that found infants born to healthy dams and infected postnatally showed viral loads  
16 that peaked between  $10^6$  and  $10^7$  viral copies per milliliter, which is approximately one  
17 log higher than that demonstrated by the adults and where viral RNA was detected in  
18 several neurological sites two weeks post infection [32]. Neither infant in this study  
19 showed signs of potential virus-induced pathology at necropsy. F10 harbored a choroid  
20 plexus cyst that resulted in unilateral hydrocephalus in the brain, but such cysts are  
21 common, are generally considered of little consequence and are not likely viral in origin.

22  
23 Antibody responses. We next examined humoral responses in the infants to see if they  
24 might explain the strikingly low viral loads. We used a plaque reduction neutralization  
25 test (PRNT) to assess neutralizing antibodies in serum after birth and after infection in  
26 both infants. Both showed detectable levels of neutralization at birth, which quickly

1 waned below the limit of detection by 2 to 3 months. Neutralizing antibodies reemerged  
2 after infection and continued to rise until euthanasia at 2 weeks post infection (Figure  
3 4A). To measure binding antibodies, we employed a whole virion ELISA assay using  
4 plasma samples collected throughout the infants' lives both before and after infection.  
5 Binding IgG titers decreased between birth and 3-4 months of age, consistent with the  
6 expected kinetics of passively-transferred maternal IgG, but remained detectable until  
7 viral inoculation at five months, and then rose after infection, similar to the neutralizing  
8 antibody titers (Figure 4B).

9

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## 11 **Discussion**

12 ZIKV reemerged in 2015 in South America and was quickly correlated with an increase  
13 in infants born with profound neurological defects [1, 2]. It's not entirely clear what  
14 fraction of pregnant women that become infected with ZIKV during pregnancy transmit  
15 the virus to their developing fetus but consequences to the fetus can range from mild to  
16 severe. Additionally, nonhuman primate studies suggest that infants may remain  
17 susceptible to ZIKV induced disease even if infected after birth [32], but the frequency  
18 and disease severity postnatal ZIKV infections in human infants remains to be fully  
19 examined [37, 38].

20

21 Given the high incidence of ZIKV in several countries during the height of the outbreak  
22 [39], the relative abundance of the most competent vector for ZIKV transmission, the  
23 mosquito *Aedes aegypti*, particularly in urban environments (Centers for Disease Control  
24 [CDC], 2017), it's likely that many infants born healthy to infected mothers are  
25 themselves exposed to the virus via mosquito bite after birth. It is not clear if passively  
26 acquired maternal antibodies against ZIKV can offer some level of protection and for

1 what period of time after birth. It is also not clear if infants exposed to the virus in utero,  
2 but born healthy and seemingly uninfected, may themselves have mounted de novo  
3 immune responses against the virus in utero. Few examples of adaptive immune  
4 responses induced in utero are described. Functional, malaria-specific T cell responses  
5 have been detected in fetuses [40], and infants are routinely vaccinated against hepatitis  
6 B virus within twenty four hours of birth, which has dramatically reduced the frequency of  
7 infant infection [41], suggesting a high level of immune competence very early in life. In  
8 the context of ZIKV, macaque data suggest that vertical transmission is quite common  
9 [33] but, to date, there is no data suggesting these infants mount antiviral adaptive  
10 immune responses. In contrast, passively acquired maternal antibodies are fairly well  
11 described. Their magnitude, transmission efficiency in utero, and decay kinetics after  
12 birth have been described in the context of infection with and vaccination against several  
13 pathogens [42, 43]. To date, no similar data on ZIKV has been reported. However,  
14 maternal antibodies to dengue virus (DENV) have been described [44-47] and may  
15 facilitate enhanced disease in postnatally DENV-infected infants [46, 47].

16  
17 Here, we report the results of a small study describing results from two infant macaques  
18 born to dams infected with ZIKV during the third trimester. One dam had relatively high  
19 levels of viral RNA detected in amniotic fluid near full gestation, possibly suggesting fetal  
20 infection, but no virus was detected in either infant after birth. A recent study of two  
21 infants infected with ZIKV after birth showed significant impairment of cognitive function  
22 and reduced reaction to fearful stimuli [32], which the authors interpreted as a likely  
23 consequence of infection during early infancy. Our behavioral analyses detected no  
24 indications that infant development was negatively affected by the maternal infection  
25 status. Both our study and a published study [32] performed behavioral observations on  
26 a limited number of animals and used different methods of behavioral analysis and thus

1 cannot be directly compared. Nonetheless, behavioral data from our infants showed no  
2 direct evidence of infection nor negative consequences of infection of their dams.

3

4 Both infants in our study harbored detectable levels of anti-ZIKV neutralizing antibodies  
5 at birth that declined between one- and four-months post birth. We interpret these data  
6 to suggest these antibodies were passively acquired from the dams as opposed to  
7 mounted directly by the infants. ZIKV-binding IgG also declined after birth but remained  
8 detectable between three and five months of age, when the animals were infected.

9 When we infected the infants with ZIKV, they exhibited low peak viremia that was rapidly  
10 cleared resulting in no evidence of infection in neurological tissues or CSF, which  
11 contrasts with published data on postnatally ZIKV-infected infant macaques [32]. ZIKV  
12 binding antibodies, likely maternal in origin, remained detectable from birth until the day  
13 of infection, possibly mediating some level of viral control. It is also possible neutralizing  
14 maternal antibodies, though undetectable in the PRNT assay at the time of infection,  
15 remained at a sufficient level to provide partial protection to the infants. In support of this  
16 possibility, infant F10, who retained detectable levels of neutralizing antibodies longer  
17 than F09, also had the lowest peak of viremia in the blood and then mounted a weaker  
18 and slower *de novo* antibody response to the virus and had less virus in lymph nodes.

19 Alternatively, maternal antibodies may mediate protection via functions other than  
20 neutralization, such as antibody-dependent cellular cytotoxicity (ADCC) and antibody-  
21 dependent cellular phagocytosis (ADCP). Maternal antibodies with ADCC function have  
22 been detected [48]. Both infants harbored viral RNA in axillary lymph nodes at necropsy,  
23 suggesting that even a brief period of serum viremia is sufficient for tissue dissemination,  
24 which may result in consequences not tested in our study, including inflammation.

25

1 Taken together, our data suggest that infants born healthy to ZIKV infected mothers  
2 maintain a level of protection from ZIKV that dampened acute viral loads and limited  
3 tissue dissemination of the virus. We propose that passively acquired maternal  
4 antibodies might mediate a modest but important level of protection from high viremia  
5 and neurological impairment demonstrated in another NHP study of early postnatal  
6 infection.

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1 **Figure Legends**

2

3 **Figure 1.** Viral dynamics in blood and amniotic fluid in two female macaques (dams of  
4 the infants in this study) (A). Each animal was inoculated with ZIKV during early third  
5 trimester and monitored for infection until giving birth via cesarean section at full term  
6 (approximately gestational day 155). Neither infant had detectable virus in serum or CSF  
7 during the first two weeks of life (B). The limit of detection of approximately 15 copies per  
8 milliliter of plasma is shown as a horizontal line in both panels.

9

10 **Figure 2.** Neurobehavioral scores for F09 and F10 and 7 controls (mean+SD). Both  
11 infants were assessed for behavioral abnormalities and test scores were measured at 15  
12 days of age (A), as described in the text. F10 was not attentive during the test of  
13 orientation so was not assessed (indicated by an asterisk \*). Each infant was likewise  
14 assessed for cognitive, motor, and temperament at sixteen and twenty weeks of age (B).  
15 The only variable that showed significant differences from control animals was  
16 temperament, at both time points.

17

18 **Figure 3.** Viral dynamics in the infants after infection. Viral loads (serum and CSF) were  
19 assessed at days 0, 3, 5, 7, 10, and at necropsy on day 14 in both infants (A). For  
20 comparison, viral loads are shown for eleven pregnant females (B) infected with the  
21 same dose and route of the same stock of virus, as well as four adult non-pregnant  
22 females (C), and four adult males (D) infected with the same dose and route of a  
23 separate stock of the same isolate of ZIKV, which was passaged an additional time in  
24 Vero cells. The limit of detection of approximately 15 copies per milliliter of plasma is  
25 shown as a horizontal line. Viremia remained detectable beyond 21 days in several  
26 pregnant females but these values are cut from panel (B) for clarity. Area under the

1 curve analysis (E) showed lower total viremia in our infants relative to nearly all other  
2 animals in our studies. Data from the pregnant females includes all time points with  
3 viremia, including beyond day 21. At necropsy, the presence of ZIKV viral RNA was  
4 assessed by qRT PCR from blood, CSF, and several brain sections as well as a lymph  
5 node from each animal (F).

6

7 **Figure 4.** ZIKV-specific antibody responses. Neutralizing antibodies were tested using a  
8 Plaque reduction neutralization test (PRNT) (A). PRNT 80% values of plasma from both  
9 infants born to ZIKV-infected mothers over the first five months of life declined to  
10 undetectable levels by 4 months, prior to infection with ZIKV. Plasma samples with  
11 PRNT 80% titers of <20 are reported at 20. Each sample was tested in duplicate; the  
12 average titer is shown. Anti-ZIKV binding antibodies were assessed using a whole virion  
13 ELISA (WVE) test (B). Binding antibodies remained detectable until infection and  
14 expanded after infection. Each sample was tested in duplicate and the average titer is  
15 shown. The lower limit of detection in this assay was determined to be 12.5 (horizontal  
16 line).

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1    **Author Contributions:**

2    N.J.M planned the studies and wrote the first draft. B.S., A.S., M.D., M.H.G., F.S.,  
3    P.P.A., K.B., and R.V.B. conducted the experiments. N.J.M., R.P.B., K.B., K.K.A.V.R.,  
4    A.A.L., M.C.B., R.V.B., S.R.P., L.L.C., A.T.P., and D.M. interpreted the studies. All  
5    authors reviewed, edited, and approved the manuscript.

6

7    **Competing interests statement:**

8    The authors have no competing interests to declare.

9

10    **Data availability:**

11    All data is available from the corresponding author on request.

12

13    **Funding:**

14    This work was supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (OPP1152818) and  
15    the National Institute of Health ORIP/OD P51OD011104 to the Tulane National Primate  
16    Research Center and NIH grant P30AI073961 to the Miami Center for AIDS Research  
17    (CFAR). Support to the Duke Human Vaccine Institute was provided by the National  
18    Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (1R21AI132677, 1P01AI132132). The funders  
19    had no role in study design.

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36

Figure 1

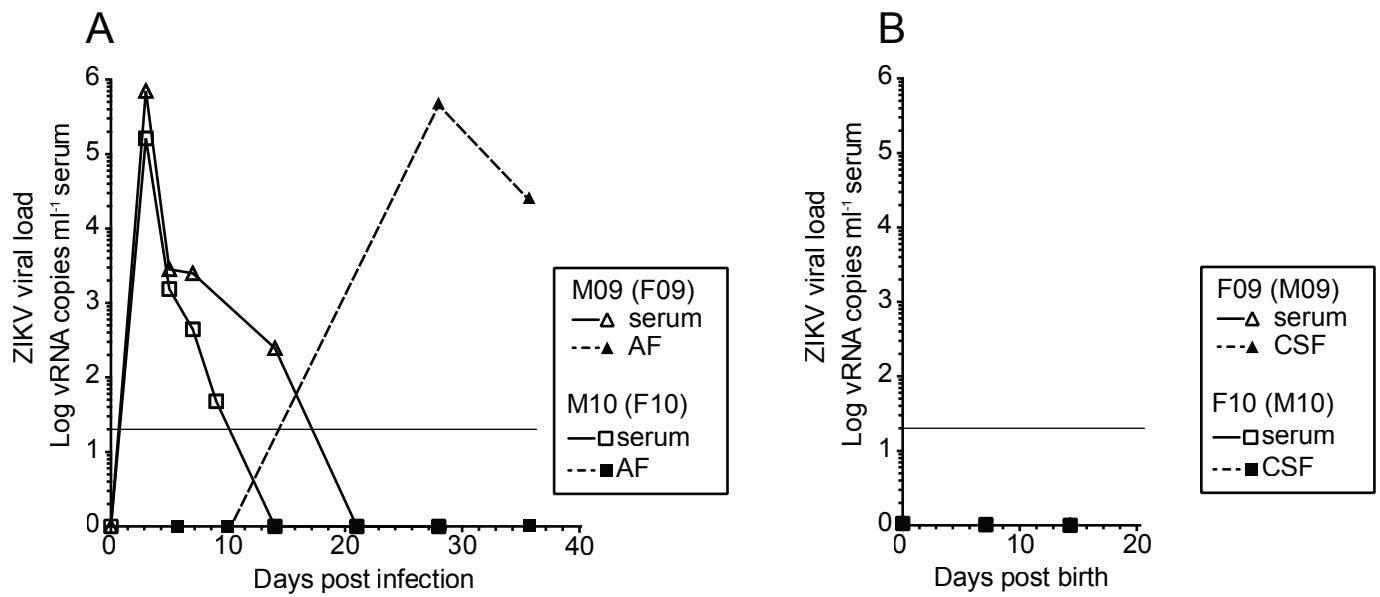


Figure 2

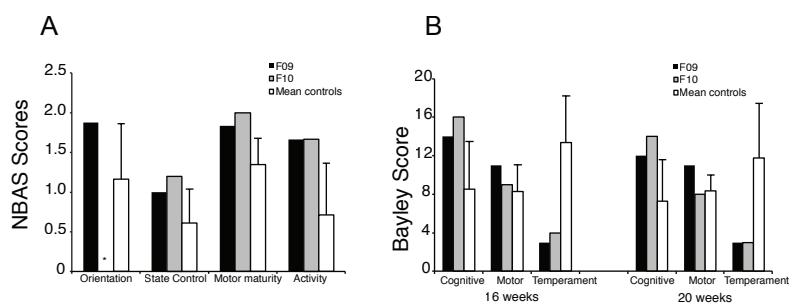
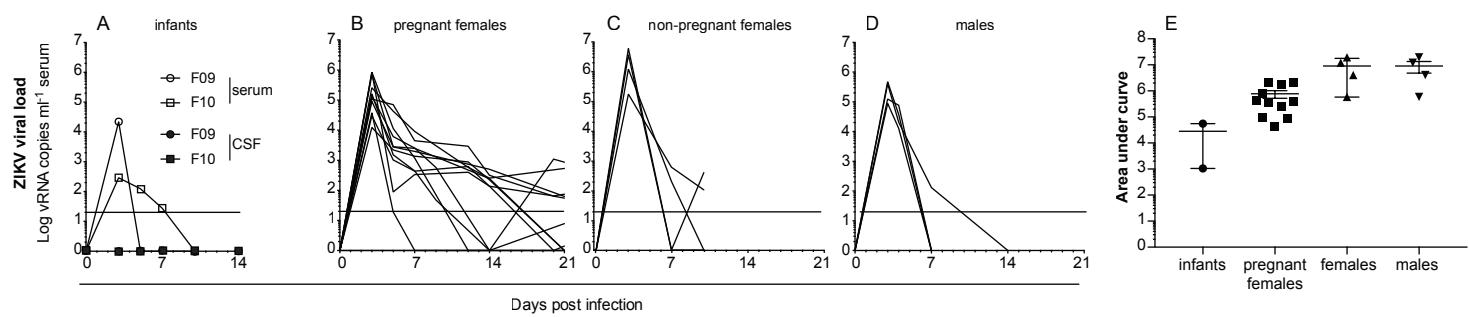


Figure 3



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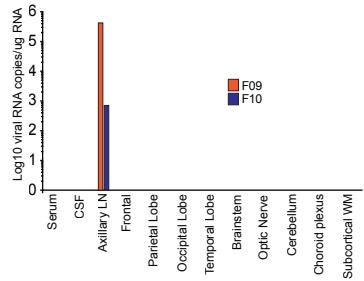


Figure 4

