

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Chikungunya Becomes A Big Problem In St. Thomas

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In August, the Virgin Islands Health Department reported there were over 150 suspected cases of Chikungunya in the territory. Since then, that number has almost tripled as the department reported 415 suspected cases on Monday, with the majority coming from St. Thomas.

The numbers may be even greater, but many people have chosen not to report to the ER, making it difficult for the Health Department to accurately collect data.

Of the 415 cases reported by DOH, 389 suspected cases were reported on St. Thomas and St. John, while only 22 suspected cases were reported on St. Croix. For Dr. Esther Ellis, Health Department epidemiologist, the numbers are troubling and are "typical of an

outbreak."

In August, Ellis said the higher number of St. Thomas cases was due in part to the high volume of tourists who visit the island daily from cruise ships coming from other Caribbean islands. And unlike dengue, which only affects 25 percent of the people bitten by the mosquito carrying the disease, chikungunya affects 75 percent of those bitten.

The territory also has a population of the Aedes mosquito that transmits the virus, making for a "perfect storm" situation--especially on St. Thomas, where thousands of people visit daily, as the island is a premier destination for tourists around the world.

The Health Department's statistics also reveal rapid community duplication, as 97 percent of the cases were transmitted locally.

Protect Yourself

Chikungunya, a mosquito-borne illness, has symptoms similar to dengue. The symptoms generally begin three-to-seven days after being bitten by an infected mosquito and may include fever, severe joint pain (often in the hands and feet), headache, muscle pain, joint swelling, or rash.

Unlike dengue which has four distinct viral types and three chances that a person who was already infected may contract the disease again, chikungunya only has one, so once the disease is contracted by a person, they are immune for life.

The V.I. Department of Health has been warning people experiencing one or more of the aforementioned symptoms to immediately contact a physician and try to prevent being bitten by mosquitoes.

The department also revealed some steps that could help prevent the spread of the disease: