

The Virgin Islands Consortium

DOH Issues Warning To VI Residents As Zika Virus, Potentially Causing Abnormal Head Growth In Babies, Hits PR

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ST. CROIX -- Acting Department of Health Commissioner Juan Figueroa-Serville, through a press release issued on Tuesday, made known that the Puerto Rico Department of Health reported its first locally acquired case of Zika virus infection, a tropical disease that may lead to babies being born with abnormally small heads.

Zika virus, originally identified in 1947 from Zika forest of Uganda, is transmitted to people primarily through the bite of an infected *Aedes* species mosquito. These mosquitoes are found throughout tropical regions of the world and are the same

mosquitoes that spread dengue and Chikungunya viruses. Mosquitoes become infected with the Zika virus when they feed on a person already infected with the virus. Infected mosquitoes can then spread the virus to other people through bites, and there is no vaccine to prevent or medicine to treat Zika virus infection.

Zika was confirmed in a resident of Puerto Rico with no known travel history. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is working closely with the Puerto Rico Department of Health to investigate how the patient may have contracted the virus. Health officials in PR are also monitoring for other cases of Zika virus infection, according to the release.

"The safety and welfare of the people of this territory is a priority for the Department of Health. We will work closely with the CDC to identify and treat any cases of the Zika Virus. No cases have been diagnosed in the territory as of yet, however we are taking every precaution to prevent an outbreak here in the territory," said Mr. Figueroa-Serville.

The CDC has issued a [travel notice](#) advising people traveling to the territory and Puerto Rico to take usual precautions to protect themselves from mosquito bites to reduce their risk of infection with Zika virus and other mosquito-borne viruses, such as dengue and Chikungunya, according to the release. These steps include wearing insect repellent, using air conditioning or window and door screens to keep mosquitoes outside, wearing long pants and long-sleeved shirts when possible, and emptying standing water inside and outside the home.

Outbreaks of Zika have occurred in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands. Because the *Aedes* species mosquitoes that spread Zika virus are found throughout the world, it is likely that outbreaks will spread to new countries. To date, Zika virus has been reported in several countries and territories in the Americas. But in 2015 the disease made the leap to the Western Hemisphere, affecting more than a million people in Brazil. It's since spread to Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, and nine other countries, according to VOX Media. Brazil is also investigating the possible association between Zika virus infection and cases of microcephaly (smaller than expected head size) in infants.

The most common symptoms of Zika virus disease are fever, rash, joint pain, and conjunctivitis. The illness is usually mild with symptoms lasting from several days to a week. Infection is thought to provide lifelong immunity. Severe disease requiring hospitalization is uncommon. Deaths are rare. Travelers returning from areas with Zika activity should seek medical care if they experience a fever and symptoms of infection. Healthcare providers in areas with reported cases should be on the alert for possible cases.

"The Virgin Islands Department of Health will conduct training for the local medical professionals, with the assistance of the CDC," said Dr. Esther Ellis, epidemiologist at DOH. "We will also be conducting testing to verify and suspected cases of the Zika Virus, as early as today."

Feature Image: Jose Wesley, a Brazilian baby shown on Dec. 23, 2015, was born with microcephaly. His mother was diagnosed with the Zika virus that researchers think may cause the birth defect.

