

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Zika Declared An International Emergency By World Health Organization

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ST. CROIX -- The World Health Organization declared the Zika virus an international public health emergency on Monday, an infrequent decision caused by growing concern that it could cause birth defects.

At a news conference in Geneva, Dr. Margaret Chan, the director general of the W.H.O., said that clusters of microcephaly in regions with Zika cases “constitute an extraordinary event and a public health threat to other parts of the world.”

She added that “international reponse is needed to minimize the threat in infected countries and reduce risk of international spread.” Dr. Chan said case control studies on

the connection between Zika and microcephaly will start in two weeks.

The outbreak of Zika, which is transmitted by mosquitoes, began in Brazil last May and has since moved into more than 20 countries in Latin America. Last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned Americans, specifically pregnant women, from traveling to the territory, even though there has been only one confirmed case here.

The main worry is over the Zika's possible link to microcephaly, a condition that causes babies to be born with brain damage and unusually small heads. Reported cases of microcephaly are rising sharply in Brazil, however, researchers have yet to establish a direct link.

Governor Kenneth Mapp [said on Friday](#) that he had mobilized various government department and agencies, led by the Department of Health and its new commissioner, Dr. Michelle Davis, to curtail the spread of the disease in the territory.

"We are extremely fortunate to have the assistance and leadership of Dr. Davis, who is a true expert in this area," the governor said.

Dr. Davis has been in constant contact with the Center for Disease Control and monitoring World Health Organization reports since learning of the potential threat to the Virgin Islands.

"We are working diligently to prepare and protect the territory," Dr. Davis said. "I am appreciative of the assistance of the CDC with the diagnostics and educational materials. I will be continuing to work with the CDC in the event of further developments."

Deputy Health Commissioner Kimberly Jones, who has helped coordinate prevention efforts, said additional resources are being directed to mosquito eradication, as well to boosting education initiatives. Public information campaigns are expected to ramp up in the coming days and information will be disseminated in schools, workplaces and at large events such as the upcoming Agriculture Fair on St. Croix.

Enforcement officers from D.O.H., the Waste Management Authority, the Department of Planning and Natural Resources and the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs temporarily assigned to the Virgin Islands Police Department will be allowed to return to their posts when an executive order assigning them to the VIPD expires on January 31, 2016, the release made known.

"These officers will be visiting neighborhoods throughout the territory to assist in eradication efforts, but we are also calling on every Virgin Islander to do their part," Ms. Jones said. "Get rid of any standing water in and around your homes and help your friends and family members do the same. Report stagnant water to the Department of Health that is too big for you to handle such as an abandoned cistern or pool."

Ms. Jones also urged Virgin Islanders to protect themselves from bites as best they can with clothing and repellents. She said those with symptoms similar to those found with the Zika virus should see a healthcare provider. D.O.H. in conjunction with the CDC continues to test specimens from suspected cases of the virus at no cost to residents, stated the release.

D.O.H. has also distributed approximately 3000 mosquito nets focusing their efforts on pregnant women, who doctors believe are at greatest risk from exposure to Zika. And officials at the department have conducted healthcare provider training sessions in both the St. Thomas/St. John and the St. Croix districts. Training has been conducted with emergency room staff at the Roy L. Schneider Hospital on St. Thomas and the Juan F. Luis Hospital on St. Croix to help them recognize suspected cases.

Additionally, a comprehensive training session was conducted with the entire staff of the Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority, as its personnel often come in contact with potential mosquito breeding grounds around bins and other disposal sites.

“I want our residents and our visitors to rest assured we are taking all possible steps to combat this virus and we will continue to keep the public informed with regular updates,” Ms. Jones said.

All those with questions or concerns should contact D.O.H. at (340) 718-1311 on St. Croix or its St. Thomas/St. John offices at (340) 774-9000. Updates and information are also available on the department’s website at www.healthvi.gov.