

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Caribbean Losing American Tourists As Zika Fears Spread, New Reuters Poll Reveals

Health / **Published On February 08, 2016 10:46 AM /**

Staff **February 08, 2016**



ST. CROIX -- The Zika virus is discouraging many Americans from traveling to Latin America and the Caribbean, with 41 percent of those aware of the disease saying they are less likely to take such a trip, according to a new Reuters/Ipsos poll, via [CNBC](#).

The poll is the latest sign that the virus -- which is possibly linked to microcephaly, a condition that causes babies to be born with brain damage and unusually small heads -- could depress travel to popular Caribbean destinations, including cold weather getaways like the territory.

Airlines and cruise ship operators have yet to report drops in bookings because of Zika, and analysts have downplayed the impact that pregnant women, who they contend would most likely be home taking care of their children, will have on the travel industry.

But awareness of the mosquito-borne virus has surged to nearly two-thirds of Americans, according to the poll of 1,595 adults in the United States conducted Feb. 1-5. That compares with 45 percent who had heard of Zika in a Reuters/Ipsos poll from late January.

"I am actively trying to get pregnant with my husband, so I am a little bit concerned," said Erica, a respondent who said she was bitten by a mosquito during a January trip to the U.S. Virgin Islands, where Zika has been reported.

Erica, who asked only to be identified by her first name for personal reasons, said she no longer plans to visit Jamaica this summer to celebrate her wedding anniversary.

"We've definitely gone back to the drawing board on that," she said, referring to the island, which is on the CDC warning list.

Of those aware of the virus, 41 percent said they were less likely to travel to Puerto Rico, Mexico or South America in the next 12 months because of Zika, the poll found. Some 48 percent said Zika had not changed the likelihood of their visiting those destinations, while others did not know.

Six out of 10 Americans aware of Zika said the virus concerned them, including 18 percent who said they were very concerned, according to the poll.

In a press release issued on Friday, Senator Marvin Blyden said Territorial Epidemiologist Dr. Ester Ellis confirmed that over 14 samples from the territory were sent to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (C.D.C.) to test for Zika. Deputy Commissioner of Health, Kimberly Jones, said results should be received soon.

World Health Organization recently [declared](#) Zika an international public health emergency; an infrequent decision caused by growing concern that it could cause birth defects.

Following the announcement, the Virgin Islands Department of Health, through a press release issued late Monday, said it would be going "door-to-door" in "affected areas" to combat the disease, according to Juan Figueroa-Serville, who still serves as acting commissioner of D.O.H. along with Dr. Michelle Davis. Mr. Figueroa-Serville said residents should take all necessary measures to protect themselves.

"We at the Department of Health are ready willing and able to serve the people of the Virgin Islands. We will be going door to door in the affected areas, providing mosquito larvacide, information and assistance in the wake of this virus. I am asking all Virgin Islanders to take precautionary measures to protect yourselves and your families and in the event that you experience any symptoms, please see your physician immediately," he said.

Dr. Davis said the declaration means that the territory will receive more assistance from the federal government. "This declaration by the WHO will afford the territory additional

resources. These resources include, but are not limited to staffing, supplies additional testing and educational assistance,” she said.

At a recent news conference in Geneva, Switzerland, 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 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](#) recently that he had mobilized various government department and agencies, led by the D.O.H. 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.