

The Virgin Islands Consortium

World Health Organization To U.S.V.I. Couples: Delay Pregnancy To Avoid Having Children With Birth Defects

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ST. CROIX -- The World Health Organization (W.H.O.) has issued a [new set of guidelines](#) urging people living in areas where the Zika virus is circulating to delay pregnancy to avoid having children with [birth defects](#).

Currently, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are the only two parts of the U.S. to have known local transmission. In the U.S.V.I., where [24 people have tested positive for the virus](#) -- [including two pregnant women](#) -- a majority of the cases are local transmissions, according to Territorial Epidemiologist Dr. Esther Ellis, speaking to The

Consortium by telephone this afternoon.

Additionally, the new guidelines affect millions of couples in 46 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The advice is an acknowledgement by the W.H.O. that with no vaccine available and mosquito eradication efforts failing to slow transmission of the virus, delaying pregnancy may be the best way that women in affected areas can avoid having children with severe brain damage.

The guidelines were originally published last week but did not garner wider attention among experts until Thursday, following a W.H.O. clarification distinguishing between people who visit Zika-affected countries and those who live in them. It says men and women of reproductive age “should be correctly informed and oriented to consider delaying pregnancy.”

“It’s about time,” said Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at the Baylor College of Medicine, speaking to The New York Times.

Dr. Hotez, whose medical school is in Houston, where the Zika virus is expected to arrive this summer, has urged women in all Zika-affected areas to consider delaying pregnancy this year. “What happens when Zika hits Texas and the Gulf Coast this summer?” he asked.

Governments of five different countries have already issued the advice, including Puerto Rico, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has steered clear of this approach, concluding that governments should not dictate what women do with their partners in their personal lives.