

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Fourteen New Cases Of Zika Confirmed In Territory As Total Climbs To 79

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ST. THOMAS -- The Department of Health is reporting that the territory saw 14 new cases of the Zika virus this week, a high number that brings the islands' total known cases to 79 -- 20 in St. Croix, 58 in St. Thomas, and 1 in St. John, according to D.O.H.

Out of 1,321 tests completed for pregnant women, 10 have laboratory evidence of Zika; 4 are presumptive positive and 6 are confirmed.

The rising number of cases among pregnant women is cause for concern, said D.O.H. Commissioner Michelle Davis, who has urged women to protect themselves and their partners while having sexual intercourse.

"Amidst growing concerns about Zika and sexual transmission, D.O.H. is urging pregnant women to be tested for the Zika virus in the first and second trimesters of pregnancy, even if they have no symptoms. Pregnant women and their partner should prevent mosquito bites and use proper sexual protection for the length of the pregnancy, or abstain from sex," Ms. Davis said.

A total of 930 Zika Prevention Kits have been distributed to pregnant women throughout the territory, according to D.O.H. Additionally, 235 presentations have been conducted. Also, since D.O.H.'s activation of the Emergency Operations Center (E.O.C.) in February, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (C.D.C.) has deployed 48 additional staff to assist with the Zika response in the territory, D.O.H. says.

And in an effort to address the rise in Zika cases in the territory and the recent discovery that Zika can also be transmitted sexually from women to men, D.O.H. has hosted a series of clinician seminars to ensure that providers have the latest information to protect their patients. The next clinician seminar will be held in St. Croix at the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital in the Third Floor Classroom on Thursday from 8:30 – 9:30 a.m.

Zika is spread primarily through the bite of an infected *Aedes* species mosquito. The most common symptoms of Zika are fever, rash, joint pain, and conjunctivitis (red eyes). The illness is usually mild with symptoms lasting for several days to a week after being bitten by an infected mosquito. People usually don't get sick enough to go to the hospital, and they very rarely die of Zika. For this reason, many people might not realize they have been infected or may be infected and have no symptoms. Zika can also be spread sexually.

The World Health Organization and the C.D.C. have urged pregnant women against travel to more than 45 countries in which the Zika virus is spreading, mostly in the Caribbean and Latin America. All pregnant women who have been to these regions should be tested for the infection, health officials have said, and should refrain from unprotected sex with partners who have visited these regions.

The Zika virus has been linked to unusually small heads and brain damage in newborns — called microcephaly — in children born to infected mothers, as well as blindness, deafness, seizures and other congenital defects. In adults, the virus is linked to a form of temporary paralysis, called Guillain-Barré syndrome.