

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Zika Virus Jumps From 79 To 115 Cases In Territory

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ST. CROIX -- The Department of Health reported on Wednesday that total Zika cases in the territory surged from 79 to 115 this week, a jump of 36 new cases ([there were 14 new cases last week](#)), the largest one-week increase of the virus in the U.S. Virgin Islands yet.

D.O.H. has changed the way it's reporting new cases. Now, the detailed breakdown by island has been placed to the very end of the press release document and can be easily overlooked. And the release failed to reveal how many, if any, pregnant women were infected in its latest batch of numbers. The latest release also buried the numbers three paragraphs down, placed in a chart showing cases in other countries, as if to compare numbers.

The new approach sees D.O.H. highlighting its efforts to fight the virus at the beginning of its press releases.

Health Commissioner Michelle Davis said the rise in cases was expected, adding that the department has learned from confirmed cases and has created a strategy to move forward. She said D.O.H. expected Zika cases to peak in the coming months; following the pattern of [2014's Chikungunya outbreak](#).

"It has been 33 weeks since the first Zika case was confirmed in the USVI. Although concerning to many, the rise in Zika cases is and has been expected," Ms. Davis said. "Analysis from the previous Chikungunya outbreak in the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico shows that the outbreak peaked between the 34th and 37th weeks; those weeks were reportedly the highest during the Chikungunya outbreak. We anticipate seeing a decline in cases in the coming months.

"The U.S. Virgin Islands has been fortunate that our numbers have remained modest and that the territory has a well-coordinated and organized infrastructure in place to respond to Zika. The Department of Health has learned from past outbreaks and has created the necessary infrastructure to provide the needed community outreach and education, disease surveillance, diagnostic control and an integrated vector control program to help protect pregnant women, the public and visitors."

D.O.H. highlighted its efforts to combat the disease, and reminded residents that its offering free mosquito inspection and treatment for all hospitals, clinics, schools, daycare centers, churches, and public places that may pose a mosquito problem. The public is also encouraged to assist in these efforts by contacting the emergency operations center and reporting any facilities or places that may be experiencing issues with mosquitoes.

Anyone exhibiting symptoms (fever, rash, joint pain, red eyes, headaches, muscle pain) is encouraged to take advantage of the free Zika testing offered through D.O.H.-supported clinics throughout the territory, according to the release.

D.O.H. says it continues to offer the following free services to pregnant women:

- Free Zika testing at [12 locations throughout the islands](#)
- Free Inspections and Treatment for mosquitoes found at/around the house
- Free [Zika Prevention Kit](#) (ZPK) containing educational materials, insect repellent, permethrin spray repellent, condoms to avoid sexual transmission of Zika, treatment tabs for preventing mosquitoes from breeding in standing water, and a bed net.

The department says residents can protect themselves from Zika and other mosquito-borne viruses by following these three "Ds" of prevention:

- Dress – wear protective clothing – long sleeves, long pants and light colors
- Drain – get rid of water containers in and around your home that can serve as breeding places for mosquitoes
- Defend – use repellent on exposed skin and treat clothes with one of several EPA-approved repellents

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.

Correction: August 11, 2016

A previous version of this story incorrectly stated that D.O.H. had stopped sharing the breakdown per island of new Zika cases. The numbers are no longer to the top of the press release, but rather to the very bottom and can be easily overlooked. We have updated the story to reflect the correct information.