

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Zika On The Rise: 28 New Cases Affect Territory; D.O.H. Upping Prevention Efforts

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ST. THOMAS -- The Department of Health has made known through its latest report that 28 new cases of the Zika virus have affected the territory as the number of cases rose from 115 to 143 territory-wide. The by-island breakdown sees St. Thomas leading with 116, followed by St. Croix with 25, and St. John with 2. D.O.H. says 16 women are believed to have been infected with the virus. However, 9 are confirmed as positive so far, while 7 remain presumptive cases. Overall, the department has performed 603 Zika virus tests, according to a press release the department issued late Thursday.

Even as cases continue to increase, D.O.H. has been ramping up its efforts to battle the virus, which 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.

D.O.H. in collaboration with Walgreens, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Ackley Communications, are hosting a Zika Action Day to be held on St. Croix on Friday, August 26 at Fort Christian and on St. Thomas on Saturday, August 27 at the Walgreens Pharmacy. Zika Action Day is a part of the D.O.H.'s awareness campaign that focuses on mosquito prevention and education. It is a day that families and the community can come together and actively learn how they can protect themselves and their loved ones. In addition to prevention information, there will be giveaways such as gift cards, gift baskets, healthy gifts and resources for prevention will be distributed to those who attend, according to the release.

"The Zika Action Day is the latest in a number of events the DOH is hosting to increase community awareness about Zika prevention. We are continuing to be diligent in our assessment, education and outreach, to keep the community informed and healthy," said D.O.H. Commissioner Michelle Davis.

D.O.H. says over 900 Zika prevention kits have been distributed to pregnant women throughout the territory and approximately 5,000 EPA-approved repellents have been distributed to the public. The department says it would be sponsoring a seminar for clinicians today at the VI Cardiac Center from 8:00 a.m. -9:00 a.m.

And D.O.H. is also offering free mosquito inspection and treatment for all hospitals, clinics, schools, daycare centers, churches, and for public places that may pose a mosquito problem. D.O.H. says it's encouraging the public to assist in these efforts by contacting the emergency operations center at (340) 712- 6205 to report any facilities or places that may be experiencing issues with mosquitoes. This could include a school, an abandoned lot, illegal rubbish dump, etc., according to the release.

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, D.O.H. says.

For pregnant women, the department is offering the following free of charge:

- 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

Lastly, D.O.H. is encouraging residents to dress appropriately to help protect themselves from the disease, which is primarily spread through mosquitoes, but is known to be transmitted through sexual intercourse. Residents should also use repellents to assure that their homes don't contain areas that harbor water, as they serve as mosquito breeding grounds.