The Virgin Islands Consortium

Five Babies Have Been Born To V.I. Mothers Infected With Zika; D.O.H. Confirms 65 New Cases

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ST. THOMAS -- The Department of Health late Tuesday confirmed that of the five babies who have been born to mothers with the Zika virus in the U.S. Virgin Islands, none suffered with microcephaly -- a birth defect causing babies to be born with unusually small heads and brain damage.

But the number of pregnant women infected with the virus saw an increase of 13 week-over-week, bringing the total to 61, with 37 said to be confirmed and another 24 in the probable category, meaning D.O.H. is convinced that the women have been infected, but is awaiting more lab results.

The increase raises the unwelcome possibility that babies in the territory, as the amount of pregnant women who are infected continue to rise, could suffer with microcephaly, which has also been linked to blindness, deafness, seizures and other congenital defects.

The total number of confirmed Zika cases overall surged to 589, with D.O.H. confirming 65 new cases this week. Per island breakdown sees St. Thomas leading with 470 cases, followed by St. Croix with 86, and St. John comes in third with 33.

Recently, federal health researchers found that children who are infected with the Zika virus after birth rarely see serious complications. The study was published on September 30, and has been deemed a bright spot in the unfolding story of the virus.

About 160 teenagers and toddlers infected with Zika virus have been reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention since 2015. The agency's new study marks the largest survey yet of laboratory-confirmed cases in children.

All of the infections were the result of travel, most commonly to the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. About 100 of the cases occurred in June and July alone, according to the report, which represents just a fraction of the actual number of children in the continental United States infected with Zika.

The children, aged 1 month to 17 years, were initially identified because they had symptoms of infection; only those who became ill were included in the research. Yet most people who are infected have no symptoms at all.

The virus can profoundly injure developing fetuses, leading to a range of birth defects including irreparable brain damage, hearing loss and eye defects. But the C.D.C. researchers, reassuringly, found no serious injury among infected children.

Typically, these children got only mildly ill: 129 had a rash, C.D.C. researchers found, while half were feverish and a quarter had red eyes or joint pain. One hundred and eleven had two or more of the four main symptoms.

Five teenagers, ages 16 and 17, were pregnant when they developed symptoms, highlighting the need for sexually active teenagers to protect themselves from Zika, especially after travel to affected places.

None of these children developed a kind of temporary paralysis called Guillain-Barré syndrome, which may be triggered by Zika infection.

Older adults are generally thought to be at higher risk for Guillain-Barré. But at the height of the Zika epidemic in Brazil, officials reported that a few children had developed the paralysis, as well as meningoencephalitis, a dangerous inflammation of the brain and spinal cord.

Even so, the C.D.C. urged health care providers to test children with suspected Zika infection, to notify state health departments of all cases, and to remain vigilant for neurological complications even in the very young.

And although no child died in the C.D.C. study, two were hospitalized. A four-year-old with a fever, a cough, and trouble eating or drinking spent three days under observation. A one-year-old with a cough and rash spent a night in a hospital.

Feature Image: Isabela Cristina, 18, who has since given birth to her child, shows a photo of her ultrasound at a hospital in Recife, Brazil in February. Ms. Cristina was infected with the Zika virus, but the scan showed her baby to be normal.