The Virgin Islands Consortium

One Year Later, Growth Of Zika In Territory Slows To A Crawl

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Approximately one year later, the spread of the Zika virus in the U.S. Virgin Islands has almost halted, with only one case being reported territory-wide week-over-over from January 3 to January 10, according to the Department of Health's latest surveillance reports.

Territory-wide, there are now 1,037 positive Zika virus cases (including 120 pregnant women), with St. Thomas leading the way with 645 cases, followed by St. Croix with 199, and St. John with 73. Last week, the total number of positive cases was 1,036, with the sole case this week being reported on St. Croix, according to D.O.H.'s latest report.

The number of positive cases in pregnant women spiked from 106 the last week in December to 120 the first week in January, an increase of 14 new pregnant women cases. So far, however, there's been no reports of Virgin Islands women who caught the virus while pregnant giving birth to babies with microcephaly, which sees babies being born with unusually small heads and brain damage.

On Friday, November 21, the World Health Organization lifted the emergency status that it placed on the Zika virus on February 1, a sign that the mosquito-borne disease's effect on the world had diminished. But the organization, a specialized agency of the United Nations, was quick to stress that the lifting of emergency status does not mean that it's downgrading the virus, which has spread throughout Latin America, the Caribbean and even some U.S. mainland states. W.H.O. said Zika remains a long-term threat that must see an equally long-term strategy to fight it.

According to the Associated Press (via the New York Times), nearly 30 countries have reported birth defects linked to Zika, with over 2,100 cases of nervous-system malformations reported in Brazil alone.

W.H.O. said the public emergency was declared when Zika clusters were appearing and a sharp increase in research was needed. Also taken into consideration at the time, was the looming 2016 Rio Olympic Games. The February declaration led the world to an "urgent and coordinated response," W.H.O. says.

Yet, the disease continues to spread, and W.H.O. acknowledged "many aspects of this disease and associated consequences still remain to be understood, but this can best be done through sustained research."

"It is a significant and enduring public health challenge, but it no longer represents an emergency," Dr. David Heymann, who heads the W.H.O. emergency committee on Zika, said (via A.P.) after the panel met for the fifth time this year. "There was no downgrading of this."

Dr. Heymann said recommendations made in recent months were now being "internalized" W.H.O., which is based in Geneva.

"If anything, this has been escalated in importance by becoming activities that will be continued in the long-term in the World Health Organization," he said.

According to the A.P., W.H.O.'s emergency declarations are traditionally designed to motivate governments to take steps to curb epidemics. "But Zika has traveled quite far by now. It's not quite clear to me what the impact" of continuing the declaration would be, Stephen Morse, an infectious disease expert at New York City's Columbia University, said.

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, and has been linked to unusually small heads and brain damage — 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.