

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Case Of Leptospirosis, A Sometimes Deadly Disease, Reported In USVI; Dept. Of Health Launches Investigation

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The Department of Health on Friday confirmed a case of Leptospirosis in St. Thomas, with the department's commissioner, Michelle Davis, stating that D.O.H., along with its federal partners, were forming a team of various government departments and agencies to investigate the case.

Ms. Davis said D.O.H.'s team of epidemiologists would investigate where the victim lives to determine how the disease was contracted. Following the investigation, the department and its partners will then launch an education campaign on prevention tips,

Ms. Davis said.

The confirmation of Leptospirosis in the USVI follows at least 10 confirmed cases in neighboring Puerto Rico. In both U.S. territories, the disease was contracted following Hurricane Maria.

In one Puerto Rico incident, Jorge Antonio Sanyet Morales, a 61-year-old bus driver, took a drink from a stream near his concrete home on a hillside in Canovanas a week after Hurricane Maria ravaged the island commonwealth of 3.5 million people. He then developed a fever, his skin turned yellow and within a week, he died at a hospital in Carolina, according to his widow, Maritza Rivera.

Dr. Juan Santiago said Mr. Sanyet was among five patients who came in his emergency clinic earlier this month with similar symptoms after drinking from streams in Canovanas and Loiza.

Leptospirosis is an infection caused by corkscrew-shaped bacteria called *Leptospira*. Signs and symptoms can range from none to mild such as headaches, muscle pains, and fevers; to severe with bleeding from the lungs or meningitis.

If the infection causes the person to turn yellow, have kidney failure and bleed, it is then known as Weil's disease. If it causes a lot of bleeding into the lungs, it is known as severe pulmonary hemorrhage syndrome.

The disease is not uncommon in the tropics, particularly after heavy rain and flooding, and its symptoms may sometimes be confused with other illnesses such as dengue.

Leptospirosis is transmitted by both wild and domestic animals. However, the most common animals that spread the disease are rodents. It is often transmitted by animal urine or by water or soil containing animal urine coming into contact with breaks in the skin, eyes, mouth, or nose.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention personnel with D.O.H. in the USVI will be helping with the investigation, Ms. Davis said.