

First cases of mosquito-contracted Zika on US mainland reported in Florida

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Last week, the first confirmed transmissions of the Zika virus directly from mosquitoes on the US mainland were reported in Florida. Four people apparently contracted the virus within a one-square-mile area in northern Miami known as Wynwood. This news was quickly followed by a report from the Florida Department of Health (FDOH) that 10 additional people had contracted the disease locally from the same area. In response, Florida Governor Rick Scott has activated the state's emergency response team from the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to deal with the outbreak.

To date, the FDOH has tested 2,300 people for the Zika virus since the beginning of July and confirmed 372 people to be infected with the virus. Until now, all of the cases of the Zika virus contracted on the mainland US had been the result of travelling abroad or having sex with such a traveler. Out of the 14 newly reported mosquito-infected cases, six are described as asymptomatic.

Instances of the Zika virus were confirmed in April by the CDC to cause birth defects in infants born to infected pregnant women. Over the last several months the virus has become an alarming threat in 58 countries and territories, with its epicenter in the more impoverished regions of Brazil. So far this year, Zika has caused nearly 5,000 children in Brazil to be born with microcephaly, a condition in which they have abnormally small heads.

According to the CDC, there have been over 600 confirmed Zika virus cases in the US in addition to over 1,000 in US territories, particularly in Puerto Rico. The first death of an American case occurred in May in Puerto Rico, and the disease has caused a sharp increase in rare autoimmune and neurological disorders among adults. The first case in which a child was born

on the US mainland with the virus came to light in June in New Jersey, when a baby girl was born with microcephaly related to Zika. Another baby had been born in January in Hawaii with the same condition.

The CDC has requested \$2 billion to combat the virus, but only \$589 million has been received—an amount that was moved from leftover anti-Ebola funding. In an interview with PBS, Tom Frieden, director of the CDC, lamented that he was disappointed that the federal government failed to allocate them the requested funds to fight the virus.

When asked how his organization would prevent a situation like that in Puerto Rico from happening in the United States, Frieden claimed that Puerto Rico has “the bad luck of having an environment that's very conducive to the spread of this particular mosquito and diseases caused by this mosquito.” He also blamed the rapid spread on that island to population density and lack of infrastructure.

To date, Zika has likely infected over 1.5 million people in Brazil, and El Salvador reported 4,000 Zika cases between November and December 2015. Colombia's National Health Institute reported over 20,000 cases in February, with three deaths there by May. Mexico reported 280 cases in May, with most of these occurring in its southern states. The World Health Organization (WHO) warned at that time that the number of cases in the Americas could reach 3 or 4 million.

One reason for alarm is the ability of the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito to rapidly spread the virus, especially in geographical areas where health professionals are unable to perform rapid diagnostic tests. Many of the regions that are hardest hit are also characterized by a lack of infrastructure, including air conditioning, window and door screens, and mosquito control efforts.

The CDC has warned since the beginning of the year that pregnant women should consider postponing travel to areas where Zika transmission is ongoing. It has also declared the outbreak to be a public health emergency.

Testing for Zika is something that has continued to be difficult both within the US and without; only a small number of labs can diagnose the virus. More importantly, there exists no vaccine for the virus. The only way to protect against Zika is to avoid it. Like the Ebola virus, Zika has been known to scientists for nearly a century, but no progress has been made in its treatment due to the lack of money corporations can make by developing it. This is because it primarily afflicts people in more impoverished countries.

Over the weekend, public health officials in England began advising pregnant women to delay “nonessential” travel to Florida until after the pregnancy. Florida Governor Rick Scott encouraged residents and visitors to “continue to use precaution by draining standing water and wearing bug spray.”

Scott also stated, however, that “Florida remains safe and open for business.” Federal health officials have advised women who are pregnant or who are considering becoming pregnant to simply avoid the afflicted area north of downtown Miami. The FDOH has also begun contracting commercial pest control companies to expand mosquito control in the impacted area.



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