

Two more cases of Zika virus diagnosed in Pennsylvania

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By Adam Smeltz / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Two more people in Pennsylvania have been diagnosed with the Zika virus, the state Department of Health said Monday, bringing the total to four since the department began issuing updates on the illness last month.

The state identified the latest patients as a man and a woman, but it wasn't clear where they live or whether they have recovered from the mosquito-borne virus. Health officials have declined to release identifying details about Zika-infected Pennsylvanians, citing rules that govern patient privacy.

Meanwhile, 124 other people in Pennsylvania were awaiting results of Zika blood tests as of Monday, up from 53 early last week, according to the state's weekly update. Those expecting results include 27 Allegheny County residents who have been or will be tested, up from 16 about a week ago, the county health department said.

Everyone tested in the county may have had exposure through travel to Zika-affected regions abroad, said county health department spokeswoman Melissa Wade. No county residents have tested positive for Zika, which can cause symptoms such as a fever, rash and joint pain for about a week.

Risks may be especially sharp for infected pregnant women, who have seen elevated rates of birth defects. Early this month, the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention began recommending a blood test for any expectant mother who has recently visited an area abroad facing a Zika epidemic.

"Before, the guidance was saying only [pregnant] women who have symptoms should be tested" after such trips, said Richard Beigi, chief medical officer at Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC in Oakland.

Dr. Beigi said a related update about sexual transmission could be sparking more tests, too. The CDC now advises that men who have visited an outbreak-affected area should abstain from sexual intercourse with pregnant partners or use condoms.

“We expected more testing. This is not a surprise,” Dr. Beigi said.

Doctors also credited growing public awareness for the testing surge. The two Pennsylvania cases announced earlier were in women who traveled abroad and have since recovered, according to the state health department.

They did not pose an infection risk, state health secretary Karen Murphy has said.

Generally, those checked for Zika in the United States have visited Central America, South America, the Caribbean or other regions where the virus has reached epidemic proportions since May. Doctors have diagnosed more than 80 travel-associated cases of Zika in the U.S. since Jan. 1, 2015, according to the CDC, which processes the blood tests.

It takes up to two weeks from the time of a blood drawing for the the agency to determine whether a person has Zika, which can spread through transfusions and sexual intercourse. But mosquito bites are the main vehicle for spreading the virus in people.

Although no Zika-infected mosquitoes have been reported in the continental U.S., researchers have said that could change within months in Southern states.

“I think the important thing to remember is, we don’t know a lot” about the virus, said Chloe Demrovsky, executive director of the nonprofit Disaster Recovery Institute in New York. She expects evolving guidance from the World Health Organization and the CDC, which has encouraged pregnant women to reconsider travel to outbreak-affected areas.

Still, Ms. Demrovsky said overall health hazards are limited.

“It’s not something to panic about,” she said.

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