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No immediate threat of Zika virus in South Mississippi



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BY JEFF CLARK
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State health department officials say there is currently no risk for a Zika outbreak in South Mississippi.

"We do not have any travel-related cases in Mississippi at this point," state deputy epidemiologist Dr. Paul Byers said.

He said the outbreak began in May.

"This is something that we've been watching for some time," Byers said. "We want everyone to know that right now in Mississippi, you are not at risk of contacting Zika virus."

The absence of the virus in the state is good news for one mom-to-be.

Morgan Shiyou of Kiln found out she was pregnant shortly before Christmas. On Wednesday, she learned she is having twin boys.

She said she plans to be preemptive should there be an outbreak of the virus close to home.

"I'm not too concerned about it, but I will take precautions," Shiyou said. "I am aware of the threat, and I will do everything I can to keep my twins safe during and after pregnancy. I will be wary of standing water, and I will wear mosquito repellent."

Disease moving closer

Officials with the World Health Organization spoke about the Zika virus Thursday during a briefing in Geneva, saying "the level of alarm is extremely high," and the disease is moving closer to the United States.

WHO Director Margaret Chan said Zika virus, which is transmitted by *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes, was first isolated in 1947 from a monkey in Uganda's Zika forest.

"For decades, the disease slumbered, affecting mainly monkeys," Chan said. "In 2007, Zika crossed its geographical range to cause the first reported outbreak in the Pacific Islands.

Chan said four more islands in the Pacific reported Zika outbreaks in 2013-14.

She said it is moving quickly across the continents.

"Last year, the virus was detected in the Americas, where it is now spreading explosively. Cases have been reported in 23 countries," Chan said.

Although no locally produced cases have been reported in North America, several travel-related cases have been confirmed in Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, New Jersey and Texas.

Travel advisory

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has advised against travel to areas of Zika outbreak, including Cape Verde, the Caribbean, Central and South America and Samoa.

Byers said it is sound advice.

"There is a risk of infection in these areas," he said. "This risk can be even more pronounced for pregnant women because of the risk for birth defects."

But Byers said precautions could prevent infection.

"Avoid mosquito exposure the best you can," he said. "Protect yourself the way you would against West Nile by wearing long sleeves, long pants and using repellent. Stay indoors and sleep under air conditioning. This is especially important for pregnant women."

Pregnant women at risk

Chloe Demorovosky, director of New York-based crisis management group Disaster Recovery Institute, said pregnant women in their first trimester may be the group at greatest risk.

"The major risk is thought to be for pregnant women as there have been reports that it may be linked to an increased incidence of microcephaly in infants, but more research needs to be done to determine whether a link exists and to what extent," she said.

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