ARE WE AT RISK?

There are no known Zika cases in New Mexico but the mosquito that carries it has been found in the area

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Las Cruces - No known Zika virus cases have been confirmed in New Mexico, but the mosquito species that can transmit the virus — linked to microcephaly, a birth defect that leads to shrunken heads in newborns — has been found in Doña Ana, Eddy and Chaves counties.

“In the summer, during the rainy season, we have the Aedes aegypti mosquito (in Doña Ana County), so the possibility of transmission of the virus is here,” said Immo Hansen, an associate professor of biology at New Mexico State University involved in mosquito repellent research.

Aedes aegypti is the main mosquito currently transmitting the virus, said Paul Ettesstad, public health veterinarian for the New Mexico Department of Health.

Zika virus is transmitted to people primarily through the bite of an infected mosquito. However, spread of the virus through sexual contact and blood transfusion has been reported, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

**New guidelines**

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently issued recommendations to reduce the risk for Zika virus blood transmission in the U.S.

The FDA recommends that blood establishments in areas without Zika virus transmission defer blood donations from individuals who are considered to be at risk for Zika virus infection for four weeks.

David Veloz, United Blood Services director of donor recruitment for El Paso and southern New Mexico, said UBS is working to educate the public about the deferral.

“In some blood drives, it’s having a big impact,” Veloz said. “We’ve seen, in some places, 50 percent of the population that is not able to donate. The closer the ties to Mexico, we know that there is a greater likelihood that (people) will (travel) back and forth.”

So far, the blood drives in Las Cruces have not been affected in

**Zika virus symptom info**

» The incubation period (the time from exposure to symptoms) of Zika virus disease is not clear, but is likely to be a few days.

» The symptoms include fever, skin rashes, conjunctivitis (pink eye) muscle and joint pain, malaise (general feeling of discomfort or illness) and headache.

» Symptoms are usually mild and last for two to seven days.

**Areas with active Zika Virus transmission**

» Cape Verde, Africa

» The Caribbean: Barbados; Curacao; Dominican Republic; Guadeloupe; Haiti; Jamaica; Martinique; the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory; Saint Martin; U.S. Virgin Islands

» Central America: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama

» Mexico

» The Pacific Islands: American Samoa, Samoa, Tonga

» South America: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Paraguay, Suriname, Venezuela

**Source:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
the way they have in El Paso, Veloz said.

While no mosquito-borne Zika virus disease cases have been reported in U.S. states, there were 84 travel-associated cases reported from Jan. 1, 2015 to Feb. 17, 2016, according to the CDC.

Twelve travel-associated cases have been reported in Texas during this time and the first case of Zika virus transmitted by sex in Dallas County, Texas was confirmed in early February.

Areas with active mosquito-borne transmission of the virus include Cape Verde, parts of the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico, the Pacific Islands and South America, according to CDC.

Zika and pregnancy

One of the more concerning aspects of Zika virus, is its possible link to microcephaly, a serious birth defect of the brain, in which a baby is born with an abnormally small head.

The virus can be spread from a pregnant woman to her fetus and reports of microcephaly in babies of mothers who had Zika virus have been reported, according to CDC.

“I think right now the main concern is about pregnant women traveling to areas where there’s ongoing Zika virus transmission,” Ettestad said. “The recommendation from CDC is not to travel to areas where there’s ongoing Zika transmission.”

Kristen Castillo, MD, OB/GYN at OB/GYN Consultants, a clinic affiliated with MountainView Regional Medical Center, said they are asking pregnant patients if they have traveled to areas where the Zika virus is most commonly seen, such as in Central and South America.

“If they have traveled to these areas, we will test them to see if they have been exposed to the virus,” Castillo said.

Pregnant women and those attempting pregnancy should use mosquito repellent when they are in an area where mosquitoes are present, Castillo said.

“It is safe to use mosquito repellent in pregnancy,” she said.

Pregnant women who have traveled to areas with Zika transmission should be tested by their health care provider within two to 12 weeks of returning, according to the state department of health.

Men who have traveled to these areas and have a pregnant partner should abstain from sexual activity or use condoms during sex for the duration of the pregnancy, according to the department of health.

Local action

Both MountainView and Memorial Medical Center are taking steps to educate patients and prepare for possible Zika virus infections.

“MountainView emergency department is well-equipped to screen for the Zika virus and proceed with testing if needed,” Castillo said. “Patients can also contact our office if they have any questions.”

Twyla Anderson, director of infection control and prevention at MMC, said MMC’s Hospital Support Center, at LifePoint Health’s corporate offices, is putting together a Zika toolkit for all facilities, which will include laboratory guidance for specimen collection, clinical guidance links and public reporting requirements. There will also be a mandatory training for MMC staff.

“Getting a good travel history on patients will be essential to find cases,” Anderson said. “The message will be the same for avoiding West Nile virus — not getting a mosquito bite.”

The state health department is pursuing the ability to test for Zika virus at its Scientific Laboratory Division in Albuquerque. Testing is currently done at CDC, according to a news release.

Symptoms, treatment

While only 1 in 5 people infected with Zika become ill, the most common symptoms are fever, rash, joint pain and conjunctivitis, or pink eye, Ettestad said.

“Most people who become infected don’t even know it,” he said. “It’s similar to West Nile virus. We’ve had West Nile for 10 years and about 80 percent of infected people have no signs or symptoms at all.”

From the time a person is exposed to Zika virus to the time they experience symptoms is believed to be a few days to a week. The virus usually stays in the
blood for about a week, but can remain longer in some people, according to CDC.

**Prevention**

The *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, an active day biter, likes to live in urban areas around people, Ettestad said.

“It almost exclusively bites people and lives in and around homes, and lays its eggs in shallow areas of water,” he said.

To prevent getting bit by one of these mosquitoes, Ettestad said he recommends looking around your home about once week to see if there are any places with standing water.

“A flower pot, a bird bath, any little thing like that — that’s where the mosquitoes will lay their eggs,” he said. “If people can eliminate those places of standing water, they can really do a lot to decrease their risk of being bit by one of those mosquitoes.”

The *Aedes aegypti* mosquito also likes to live inside people’s homes, so people should get rid of any standing water in the home as well, Ettestad said.

Other ways to prevent mosquito bites include wearing long-sleeved shirts and long pants, using EPA-registered insect repellents, wearing permethrin-treated clothing and staying in places with air conditioning or screened doors and windows to keep mosquitoes outside, according to the department of health.

Hansen, who was recently involved in a study that tested the effectiveness of certain insect repellents against *Aedes aegypti* (yellow fever mosquito) and *Aedes albopictus* (Asian tiger mosquito), said overall, DEET products work best at keeping these mosquitoes at bay.

“Spray your clothing with DEET products and use a high percentage ... no less than 30 percent DEET,” Hansen said.

Hansen and his research team also discovered that Victoria’s Secret Bombshell perfume repelled these mosquitoes for about two hours, according to an NMSU news release.

For updated information about Zika virus, visit cdc.gov/zika.

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