

CDC issues travel health advisory for St. Martin

December 18 2013, by David Mcfadden

U.S. health authorities have issued a travel advisory for the French Caribbean dependency of St. Martin because of a mosquito-borne viral disease that is apparently being spread locally at the start of the winter tourist season.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Wednesday it is closely following reports of the [chikungunya virus](#) among residents of the French side of a tiny island in the northeast Caribbean marketed as the "The Friendly Island." It's the first time the disease typically found in Africa and Asia has been reported in the Western Hemisphere among people who have not traveled recently, suggesting that the virus is now being carried by infected island mosquitoes.

"Microbes know no boundaries, and the appearance of the chikungunya virus in the Western Hemisphere represents another threat to health security," CDC Director Tom Frieden said in a statement.

The World Health Organization has reported 10 confirmed cases in tourism-dependent St. Martin, which splits the island with the Dutch constituent country of St. Maarten. The disease's further spread to other Caribbean islands, and to surrounding mainland areas, is possible, the center said in its advisory for U.S. residents traveling to the French territory.

The virus can cause fever, joint pains, a rash, headaches and muscle and joint pain that can be debilitating and persist for several weeks in severe

cases. Because it's spread by infected mosquitoes, travelers to St. Martin are advised to avoid mosquito bites by using insect repellent, wearing long sleeves and pants and using air conditioning and window and door screens to keep the bugs out.

There is no vaccine, but the virus is rarely fatal.

Silviane John, director of the St. Martin Tourist Office, said both sides of the island are cooperating closely to reduce mosquito breeding sites and increase public awareness about the importance of dumping out stagnant water. Mosquito fogging trucks are frequently seen on the streets, she said.

"It's a concern for us right now, for sure. We haven't heard of any cancellations from hotels or airlines so it is a wait-and-see game," John said from St. Martin, where many of the visitors are French as well as Americans or Canadians escaping from the northern cold.

St. Martin's government was drafting a letter to airlines letting them know how they are battling the spread of the [virus](#), John said.

The island is already battling an outbreak of dengue fever commonly spread by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which also spreads chikungunya.

The CDC is advising U.S. travelers returning from the Caribbean to seek out medical care if they experience chikungunya symptoms. It also says health care providers should be on the alert.

More information: CDC: www.cdc.gov/chikungunya

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