

Scientists: Mosquito virus spreads to Americas

December 17 2013, by David Mcfadden

A nasty virus first detected in Africa that is spread to people by the bite of infected mosquitoes is being locally transmitted in the Americas for the first time on the tiny French Caribbean dependency of St. Martin, health officials said Tuesday.

Epidemiologists have so far confirmed about a dozen cases of locally acquired [chikungunya virus](#) in St. Martin, which shares a 34-square-mile (87-square-kilometer) island in the northeast Caribbean with the Dutch territory of St. Maarten. There are dozens more suspected cases.

The illness found mainly in Africa and Asia is usually not life threatening. But there is no vaccine for it, and it can cause a debilitating sickness with fever, rash, fatigue and vomiting and intense muscle and joint pain that can last for weeks in serious cases. It's commonly spread by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito that transmits dengue fever, a similar but more serious illness with a deadly hemorrhagic form.

On Tuesday, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention sent out a [health](#) advisory to doctors in the United States to consider chikungunya infection in patients with acute onset of fever and [joint pain](#), "especially those who have recently traveled to the Caribbean."

The French Caribbean territory of St. Martin shares a tiny island with Dutch St. Maarten. Health officials on both sides of the island are responding to the outbreak by reducing mosquito breeding sites, enhancing epidemiological surveillance and enlisting the help of the

public to clear out stagnant water. The tourist-dependent island is already battling an outbreak of [dengue fever](#).

"The obligation is to control the progression of chikungunya, not least to prevent it spreading to other islands," said St. Martin Vice President Guillaume Arnell. "It started here so we have to contain it here."

Beryl Irons, the Pan American Health Organization and World Health Organization representative for Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean, said she thinks the regional response is good so far. The first two cases were confirmed earlier this month.

"There is already heightened surveillance within the region because they have dengue," Irons said by telephone.

In the British Virgin Islands, Health Minister Ronnie W. Skelton told lawmakers that confirmed cases were very likely to rise on St. Martin as laboratory tests are completed. He said the Dutch side of the island has no reported cases.

"There is currently no evidence of cases in other parts of the Caribbean," Skelton said in a statement to the British islands' House of Assembly.

Chikungunya has showed up in in parts of Italy and France over the past decade. It's not clear how the virus got to St. Martin. But the CDC says there is a risk of importing the mosquito-borne illness into new areas through infected travellers.

The CDC says chikungunya means "that which bends up" in the Kimako language of Mozambique, a reference to the physique of an infected patient. It was first isolated in 1953 in the blood of a patient in Tanzania.

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