

US Virgin Islands confirms first chikungunya case (Update)

June 11 2014, by David Mcfadden

A nasty mosquito-borne virus that has been spreading rapidly in the Caribbean has made its way to the U.S. Virgin Islands, authorities said Wednesday.

Health officials in the U.S. Caribbean territory said they confirmed the islands' first locally transmitted case of chikungunya. They did not disclose any information about the patient. A second patient in the three-island territory was infected elsewhere.

From the island of St. Croix, Health Commissioner Darice Plaskett said local authorities were working closely with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other agencies to "raise awareness and prevent the spread of the virus."

As of June 6, the Pan American Health Organization had recorded about 135,000 suspected and confirmed cases since the Western Hemisphere's first locally transmitted case was confirmed in the Caribbean in December. That was in St. Martin, a French territory 230 miles east of Puerto Rico.

Since that first case, the viral disease first identified in Africa has spread at a rapid clip, including dozens of confirmed cases in French Guiana and Guyana on the northern shoulder of South America.

There have been cases in Venezuela and other South American countries among people who picked up the virus elsewhere. A few U.S. states are

also investigating cases among residents who recently traveled to the Caribbean.

Concern about the advancing virus is growing in the United States. The two species of mosquitoes that spread chikungunya are found in the southern and eastern U.S. and some epidemiologists believe the first local transmissions could occur this summer, given the large number of American travelers to the Caribbean.

The island of Hispaniola, which is shared by the Dominican Republic and Haiti, appears to have been particularly hard-hit by the newly arrived virus. On Wednesday, the Dominican health ministry said tens of thousands of suspected cases had been detected in 30 of the country's 32 provinces.

Chikungunya's symptoms include a burning fever, headaches and a debilitating pain in joints. There is no vaccine for the virus, which is rarely fatal.

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