

Florida braces for Zika: officials

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Florida, with its wet, mostly subtropical climate, should be fertile ground for the Zika virus, but is ready to fight hard to fend it off, officials said Wednesday.

So far, the southeastern US state has recorded 72 Zika cases, all in people who had traveled to countries where the virus is more widespread, particularly in Latin America, said Anna Marie Likos, an epidemiologist at the state health department, at a University of Miami seminar on the illness.

Mosquito-transmitted Zika infection has been linked to increased rates of microcephaly in babies born to infected mothers.

The birth defect causes babies to have abnormally small heads, which can cause brain damage.

Zika has also been linked to Guillain-Barre, a rare condition that causes the body's immune system to attack a part of the nervous system that controls muscle strength.

Florida, particularly the Miami airport, is a major crossroads for tourists from Latin America and the Caribbean.

The hot, wet conditions facilitate mosquito breeding.

The *Aedes aegypti* mosquito behind Zika's quickening spread also transmits dengue and chikungunya.

But the authorities in Florida have been able to fend off both viruses, Likos said.

Even though Zika is cause for concern and action, "there's no need to panic," said Lillian Rivera, director of the Miami-Dade County health department.

"We will deal with this because we have great scientists and we have great resources that can get us through this whole situation of Zika," she added.

Governor Rick Scott declared a state health emergency in February to put the state on a disease-fighting footing.

Brazil has been hardest hit by the Zika outbreak, with some 1.5 million people infected.

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