

First widely available Zika test OK'd for emergency use

April 29 2016



In this Thursday, Feb. 4, 2016, file photo, a medical researcher uses a monitor that shows the results of blood tests for various diseases, including Zika, at the Gorgas Memorial laboratory in Panama City. On Thursday, April 28, 2016, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration authorized Quest Diagnostics to offer the first commercial test for the Zika virus in the United States. Previously, Zika tests were only available through a handful of government-designated laboratories. Quest said the commercial test could be available as early as the first week of May. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco, File)

The first commercial test for the Zika virus has been cleared for emergency use in the U.S. and could be available by next week.

The Food and Drug Administration granted the authorization Thursday to the test's developer, Quest Diagnostics, which said it would make it widely available to doctors for patient testing.

The company said the test results will initially be processed at a laboratory in San Juan Capistrano, California, which developed and validated the technology.

Eventually the test could be expanded to several dozen other Quest laboratories throughout the U.S. and in Puerto Rico. Previously Zika tests were only available through a handful of government-designated laboratories.

The new test detects genetic material known as RNA from the Zika virus in human blood serum.

Zika has become epidemic in Latin America and the Caribbean since last fall. The virus is mainly spread through mosquito bites and causes mild illness or no symptoms in most people. But it can cause microcephaly, a severe birth defect in which babies are born with abnormally small heads.

There have been 426 cases of Zika reported in the U.S.—all linked to travel to outbreak areas. But officials think it's likely some small clusters of Zika infections will occur in the U.S. when mosquito numbers boom.

The virus is spreading quickly across Puerto Rico and officials there recorded the first Zika-related U.S. death on Friday. Zika-related deaths in adults are considered extremely rare.

The U.S. territory is battling more than 700 Zika cases and seeks federal funds to help prevent an epidemic at a time of worsening economic crisis.

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Citation: First widely available Zika test OK'd for emergency use (2016, April 29) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

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