

Florida health warriors deploy in war on Zika

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Florida's hot, wet climate puts the state at risk from the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito that spreads the Zika virus

Carlos Varas inspects the front yards of Miami homes armed with larvicide, pesticide and what looks like a long-armed eyedropper. His mission: destroy the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito that spreads the Zika virus.

Varas reaches into a leafy garden and sucks up water from tiny pools

drop by drop. He examines the sample and grins: inside, tiny critters wiggle around nervously.

They are the larvae of the feared *Aedes aegypti*.

"We look for standing water or flying mosquitoes," Varas told AFP.

If they find larvae they spread out grain larvicide with a scoop. "If we find adult mosquitoes in the area we spray, and we try to eliminate the sources where they are breeding," he said.

The mosquito-borne Zika [virus](#) has been linked to a surge in cases of the birth defect microcephaly—babies born with abnormally small heads and deformed brains—after their mothers were infected with the virus. There is no vaccine for Zika.

Zika has spread rapidly across Latin America and the Caribbean in the past months, and experts warn that the continental United States will likely see an increase in cases as summer begins in the northern hemisphere.

Florida's hot, wet climate "has all the environmental conditions for an epidemic," said Carlos Espinal, head of the Florida International University Global Health Consortium and an expert in tropical diseases.



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Primed for an epidemic

The best way to stop the spread of Zika is to kill off *Aedes aegypti* mosquitos, which breed in even tiny pools of stagnant water—the mammoth task facing Varas and his fellow inspectors.

But given the size of Florida "there will not be enough inspectors to cover the territory," Espinal told AFP.

"This is a job that has to be done not only by the health service, but by the community."

Coordinated work between community leaders and county health

officials to destroy the *Aedes aegypti* larvae is "very important," he said.

Health authorities are especially frustrated by Washington's delay in releasing more federal funds to fight the virus.



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Tom Frieden, head of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), is working feverishly to convince Congress to approve the \$1.9 billion to fight Zika that President Barack Obama asked for in February.

"Imagine this: You're standing by a lake and you see someone drowning. You have the ability to save that person, but your hands are tied,"

Frieden wrote recently on the White House blog.

"The ability to prevent dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of severe birth defects creates a special responsibility—every child protected is a tragedy prevented."

In Brazil, some 1.5 million people have been infected with the virus, and nearly 1,300 babies have been born with microcephaly since the outbreak of Zika began there last year.

The virus, which usually causes only mild, flu-like symptoms, can also trigger adult-onset neurological problems such as Guillain-Barre Syndrome, which can cause paralysis and death. In an added complication, there is limited, but growing evidence that Zika can be transmitted sexually.

As of June 1 the CDC had registered 618 cases of Zika infection in the continental United States—all of them people who contracted the virus abroad.



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Governor Rick Scott said that Florida residents must prepare for a Zika outbreak with the same diligence that they prepare for a hurricane.

"We don't yet know for certain what will happen with this virus, but we owe our citizens a vigorous and thorough preparation effort at the federal level to best protect their health," he said.

"Washington must put politics aside and agree to a comprehensive plan to protect and respond to the spread of Zika in America."

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