

US official urges Puerto Rico to step up fight against Zika

August 11 2016, by Danica Coto

The U.S. surgeon general on Thursday urged Puerto Rico to step up its public education campaign against Zika as he warned that 25 percent of the island will be infected with the mosquito-borne virus by year's end.

Dr. Vivek Murthy said during a visit to the U.S. territory that local officials need to boost mosquito control efforts and make contraception more accessible and affordable.

"We cannot afford to wait much longer," he said. "I am deeply concerned about how quickly the virus is spreading."

Puerto Rico has had a total of 8,776 registered Zika cases, including 901 pregnant women, since the first case was reported in December. A total of 88 people have been hospitalized, and 27 have been diagnosed with a temporary paralysis condition called Guillain-Barre that has been linked to Zika.

Murthy said his biggest concern was pregnant women because Zika has been linked to severe birth defects and other developmental problems. Like local officials, Murthy stressed that Puerto Ricans need to take the virus seriously, even though the extent of the infection is masked because eight out of 10 show no symptoms. However, those people can still spread the virus and should use repellent and long-sleeved shirts and pants, he said.

"Society needs to be responsible," Murthy said. "We need to make sure

those babies have a shot at a healthy life."

Puerto Rico reported the first microcephaly case acquired on U.S. soil in May. It involved a fetus that a woman turned over to health authorities. Since then, no microcephaly cases have been reported, but federal officials say it's only a matter of time.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently urged Puerto Rico to allow aerial spraying with naled, but the governor instead authorized the use of Bti, an organic larvicide, because of health and environmental concerns. Murthy declined to say whether Puerto Rico should have used naled like officials did in Miami to fight a small Zika outbreak.

"Whatever the right strategy is for Puerto Rico, we must make sure we are implementing it quickly because there is no one single action that we can take that will address this epidemic," he said.

Murthy said more funding is needed to ease a backlog of tests for Zika in Puerto Rico. Gov. Alejandro Garcia Padilla, meanwhile, said he is seeking federal funds to open a vector control office on the island, which currently lacks one.

Both said it doesn't matter what government agencies do to fight Zika if society doesn't take preventive measures.

"People have to understand the seriousness of this issue," Garcia said.

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Citation: US official urges Puerto Rico to step up fight against Zika (2016, August 11) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-08-urges-puerto-rico-zika.html>

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