

University of Florida awarded \$1.7M to study Zika in Haiti

September 15 2016

The University of Florida announced Thursday that it has been awarded a U.S. grant of roughly \$1.7 million to research the mosquito-borne Zika virus in Haiti.

The university's Emerging Pathogens Institute said in a statement that the U.S. National Institutes of Health grant will be allocated over four years. Director Dr. Glenn Morris said it will fund work identifying Zika cases in the Caribbean nation and "help us begin to understand the risk to Florida."

Last week, aerial insecticide spraying to combat mosquitoes carrying Zika started in Miami Beach. The city's South Beach area has also become the first place on the U.S. mainland where the virus was isolated in mosquito samples, with health authorities recently reporting that three batches of the insects tested positive for Zika.

Although Zika was first identified in 1947, the virus wasn't considered a major health threat until a major outbreak in Brazil last year revealed that Zika can lead to severe birth defects when pregnant women are infected. In February, the World Health Organization declared the spread of Zika a global emergency, and epidemics have sparked in at least 70 countries.

A few months ago, Haiti confirmed a case of Zika-related microcephaly, a severe birth defect. It announced its first cases of Zika on Jan. 15.

But the full extent of Haiti's Zika outbreak and the number of accompanying neurological disorders remains a big unknown. Haiti's severely under-resourced health sector does not have routine data collection systems that would allow experts to adequately track and document disease outbreaks.

Morris said the funding will help experts at the Emerging Pathogens Institute shed light on the ways that Zika spreads and "the danger it poses to regions with ongoing epidemics."

The institute's researchers have previously suggested that Zika has been present in Haiti since 2014. A team found the virus in the plasma of three Haitian youngsters some two years before Haiti announced its first cases and months before Brazilian researchers verified the virus there. They published their findings on April 25.

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