NIH accelerating research on Zika vaccines
by Melissa Jenco, News Content Editor

U.S. health officials announced Thursday (1/28) they are accelerating research into vaccines and diagnostic tools for Zika virus.

The efforts are bolstered by previous work developing vaccines for other Flaviviruses like West Nile and dengue.

"These approaches are promising, but it is important to understand we will not have a widely available safe and effective Zika vaccine this year and probably not even in the next few years, although we may be able to begin a phase one clinical trial in this calendar year," said Anthony S. Fauci, M.D., director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

The news came as U.S. and international health authorities each held news conferences Thursday to provide updates on the virus spreading through Latin America and the Caribbean.

Zika virus primarily is spread by Aedes mosquitoes. For the 20% who display symptoms, the illness is mild and may include fever, rash, joint pain and conjunctivitis. However, the virus recently raised alarms in Brazil where researchers are studying possible links between infected pregnant women and the birth defect microcephaly in their babies.

World Health Organization (WHO) leaders said in a statement Thursday the virus is "spreading explosively" and estimated 3 million to 4 million people could be infected in the Americas within a year. On Feb. 1, a WHO committee will determine whether to declare a public health emergency of international concern.

While 31 travelers have brought the virus back to the continental U.S., mosquitoes here are not spreading the virus. Officials from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said they expect this type of local transmission eventually, but they don't anticipate large-scale outbreaks in the states.

"Our urban areas aren't as densely populated as affected areas in Central and South America, and we have widespread use of air conditioning and stronger mosquito control," CDC Principal Deputy Director Anne Schuchat, M.D., said.

In addition to the 31 continental cases, there have been 19 cases in Puerto Rico and one in the U.S. Virgin Islands, some of which were transmitted locally.
The CDC continues to urge pregnant women not to travel to affected areas. If they must travel, they should take steps to avoid mosquito bites.

Pediatricians treating infants whose mothers may have been infected with Zika virus can refer to new algorithms the CDC developed in collaboration with the Academy.

The NIH also is working on diagnostic tools to determine more quickly whether a person is currently or previously has been infected with Zika and to better distinguish it from similar viruses.

"Such diagnostic tools will be critical to reassure the uninfected pregnant women in areas where Zika is occurring and pregnant women returning from such areas," Dr. Fauci said.

Resources

- Information for clinicians
- Information for parents
- AAP blog, "Zika virus - Pediatricians be aware"