Preventing the spread of the mosquito-borne Zika virus in PA

The Aedes mosquito, the primary transmitter of the Zika virus, will return to Pennsylvania this summer as the weather gets warmer.

Risk of the virus spreading in the commonwealth is currently very low, but state officials released a response plan as part of precautionary steps taken prior to the start of mosquito season in June.

While the symptoms of Zika are usually very mild or even undetectable in adults, the virus is linked to serious birth defects like microcephaly and other developmental problems in the brains, eyes, and ears of infants born to mothers with the virus.

As of May 25, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) had confirmed 19 cases of Zika in Pennsylvania, but all involved individuals who contracted the disease while traveling in infected countries. So far there have been no confirmed cases of mosquitos carrying the Zika virus in any part of the U.S.

Governor Tom Wolf has said that his office plans to work with the state Department of Health in order to develop a state-run blood testing system to test Pennsylvania residents for Zika. Such a system would reduce reliance on federal CDC laboratories and reduce wait times for results from about a month to just two weeks.

Additionally, if Zika-carrying mosquitos are detected in an area, the state plans to spray pesticides in 150- to 200-yard areas around the homes of confirmed or suspected Zika patients.

Medicaid director Vikki Wachino has encouraged states to use Medicaid as another defense against Zika, as the federal program covers preventative measures including birth control, detection services, and treatment options for beneficiaries under 21 – which would include infants with birth defects linked to the virus.

Aedes mosquitos bite during the daytime. Pennsylvania residents, especially pregnant women, are advised to take the following precautionary measures to avoid the disease and prevent its spread.

- Wear light-colored, lightweight, loose-fitting clothing that covers exposed skin
- Use EPA-approved insect repellants as directed, which are safe for women who are pregnant or nursing
- Install and repair door and window screens
- Clean clogged roof gutters and remove areas of standing water near your home, as these are where mosquitos lay their eggs

Men who have traveled to areas where Zika has spread are advised to use condoms to avoid transmitting the disease sexually, especially if their partners are pregnant or could become pregnant.

Individuals who visits an area where Zika is found, or who develop any of the following symptoms associated with Zika, should see their doctor:

- Fever

- Rash
- Joint pain
- Conjunctivitis (red eyes)

These symptoms can last for several days to a week after a bite, and can be treated at home with plenty of rest and fluids. Officials recommend that affected persons take acetaminophen or paracetamol to reduce pain or fever and consult with their physician. During the first week of symptoms, avoid mosquito bites so as not to pass on the virus.

Currently there is no vaccine or medicine available to prevent or combat Zika. Multiple pharmaceutical companies are developing possible vaccines, with some hoping to conduct human trials this year.

View Pennsylvania's detailed Zika Virus Response Plan here.

For more information, contact Dr. Michael Consuelas, HAP's senior vice president, clinical integration.