

Asian nations at risk as Singapore scrambles to contain Zika

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Singapore: With 151 confirmed cases in Singapore, Zika is clearly wreaking havoc in the Asian nation. According to a joint release by the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the National Environment Agency (NEA) two pregnant women have tested positive for the virus. Recently Malaysia confirmed its first Zika case in a woman who had traveled to Singapore.

"Over time, we expect Zika cases to emerge from more areas," said Singaporean Minister for Health Mr Gan Kim Yong, in a statement released Wednesday. All confirmed cases have been admitted to hospitals where they will stay until they have tested negative for the virus.

The Zika virus is transmitted mainly by Aedes mosquitoes, and has been linked to microcephaly and other birth defects thus putting pregnant women at risk, according to the World Health Organization. The virus can also be spread through sexual transmission. There is currently no cure or vaccine to prevent Zika infection, and treatments are focused on relieving symptoms.

NEA said that vector control remains key to reducing the spread of the Zika virus. NEA said that it takes a systematic and holistic approach to arrest mosquito borne transmission in Singapore, through surveillance, prevention and control, outbreak management and outreach. The objective is to keep mosquito-borne disease incidence low through reducing the mosquito population and breaking the disease transmission chain. The agency added that it not only conducts checks for mosquito-breeding habitats based on cases, but also takes a preventive and risk-based approach through pre-emptive checks in areas assessed to be at higher risk, even in the absence of cases.

As a precautionary measure, Malaysia and Indonesia have announced they would be implementing additional passenger screening procedures at its airports, foreign ministries in the US, Australia, Taiwan and South Korea have all issued alerts, advising pregnant women against traveling to Singapore. UK, Australia have issued travel advisories or their citizens as Zika cases skyrocket in Singapore.

Singapore's National Environment Agency has deployed more than 200 officers to inspect the affected area and conduct mosquito-eradication and mosquito-breeding prevention operations, such as thermal fogging, drain flushing and oiling. The agency will also run a public education program and distribute insect repellents.

The Ministry of Health said it would continue to screen potentially infected people at Tan Tock Seng Hospital's Communicable Disease Centre, and had alerted all medical facilities to be more vigilant in monitoring for cases of Zika.