
Brazil Aims to Develop New Zika Virus Vaccine in 'Record Time'

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The Brazilian Health ministry said Sunday it has developed new testing kits to quickly identify the presence of the Dengue, Zika and Chikungunya viruses, which are all carried by the same species of mosquito.

According to health minister Marcelo Castro, priority testing will be given to pregnant women. Funds have also been allocated to finance a bio-medical research center to speed up the search for a Zika vaccine. In December, the Brazilian Ministry of Health declared a state of emergency, urging its citizens, especially pregnant women, to take precautions during the country's holiday season in order to reduce their exposure to the deadly mosquito-borne infection. Some evidence suggests the fever can cause unborn babies to develop microcephaly — a neurological disorder that results in babies being born with abnormally small heads, causing severe developmental issues, brain damage and sometimes death.

NEWS: A Few Cases of Zika Virus Uncovered in Latin America and the Caribbean

At the moment, the only method to combat the virus, which is spread by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, is to clear bodies of stagnant water.

"Today there is only one way to fight the Zika virus, which is to destroy the mosquito's breeding grounds," Castro said. "The final victory against the virus will only come when we develop a vaccine against that disease." Castro said the goal is to develop a vaccine "in record time."

The Health Ministry says at least 3,530 babies have been born with microcephaly in the country since October: a steep rise from 2014, when fewer than 150 such cases were recorded.

Some Brazilian women have decided to leave the country during their pregnancies to limit the prospect of catching the disease.

The rise in cases of the virus across the Americas and the Caribbean caused the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to warn pregnant women off travel to 14 countries and territories in the region on Friday.

In January, a woman in Hawaii gave birth to child who suffered brain damage, possibly as a result of the Zika virus, which the mother is believed to have contracted while living in Brazil.
