FILE - In this Friday, Feb. 12, 2016 file photo, Lara, who is less then 3-months old and was born with microcephaly, is examined by a neurologist at the Pedro I hospital in Campina Grande, Paraiba state, Brazil. Scientists suspect an outbreak of the Zika virus is behind a surge in a rare birth defect in Brazil. But how are they going to prove it? Authorities in the South American country were quick to make the link last fall. But experts say the evidence is still circumstantial. Several studies are underway in Zika outbreak countries to see if the mosquito-borne virus is the actual case. (AP Photo/Felipe Dana, File)

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**NH, but not globetrotters, safe from Zika**

By TINA FORBES

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While Central and South American countries have seen outbreaks of the mosquito-born Zika Virus, the risk to New Englanders remains low - though health professionals urge caution for travelers, especially pregnant ones.

First identified in 1947, the Zika Virus has recently been associated with the birth defect microcephaly.

"(The virus) been around for a long time, but the relationship between Zika and microcephaly is a new highlight," said Susan Barbaro, a Rivier University biology professor. Characterized by a small head and brain, microcephaly can vary case-by-case.
It depends on how severe it is. Some people can have a variation and function perfectly normal," Barbaro said.

As of Feb. 18, there have been no Zika cases reported in New Hampshire.

"We have had a number of people travel abroad who we are testing, but we've had no positive results so far," said Beth Daly, Infectious Disease Surveillance Chief at the state Department of Health and Human Services.

"The mosquito species capable of carrying it, Aedes aegypti, does not exist in New Hampshire. It is found in the continental United States, but really just in the Southeast part of the country," Daly said.

With the mosquitoes not present, there is little risk of the virus getting a foothold in the state, even with residents traveling abroad.

"It's not really transmitted person-to-person," Daly said.

Three cases have so far been reported of the virus spreading from an infected male to a female through sexual contact, but not the other way around, according to the CDC.

Those infected with the Zika Virus may experience flu-like symptoms, and possibly conjunctivitis, although some people don't exhibit any symptoms, according to the CDC. Residents traveling to affected areas should defend against mosquito bites by wearing long sleeves, bug spray and sleeping under an insect-repellent net, Daly said.

"Pregnant women should consider postponing their travel plans," she said, noting the suspected association between the virus and microcephaly, "Pregnant women who have already traveled should be tested for the Zika Virus."

City public health director Bobbie Bagley said the best course of action for Nashua residents is to be informed. "Our main focus here is making sure people have as much information as they can have," Bagley said.

For those traveling to affected areas, Bagley also recommended pregnant women test for the virus because of the association with microcephaly.

"Pregnant women are who we're most concerned about, any other healthy person may have flu symptoms, and those symptoms are usually mild. Most of the time they're not sick enough to go to the hospital," she said.

While the virus can't thrive in New England, Barbaro said residents should still be wary of mosquitoes.

"We have West Nile Virus in this area, and EEE. People should remove any standing water in and around their home," she said.

The outbreaks are symptoms of a changing world, she said. "It's only going to get worse, and we all have to be prepared for that. Climate change, population sprawl, encroaching on the environments of infectious agents – unfortunately that's the future," Barbaro said.

Zika outbreaks have occurred in the recent past. In 2007, 75 percent of people living on Yap Island in Micronesia were infected. In 2013, there was another large outbreak on French Polynesia, and beginning April 2015, there has been a massive outbreak in Brazil, said DHHS. Zika virus has been spreading throughout South and Central America and the Caribbean quickly since then.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Benjamin Chan said while there is no risk of contracting the virus in New Hampshire, state health officials are monitoring the situation to keep residents and healthcare providers informed.

"We encourage people to be aware of the travel advisories issued by the CDC and consult their healthcare providers before and after any travel to affected tropical areas, especially if the person traveling is pregnant or attempting to become pregnant," Chan said in a press statement. The travel advisory from the CDC is online at wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/zika-travel-information.

At the national level, the CDC and National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases addressed the Senate Feb. 11 on the spread of Zika, and what it means for the U.S.

CDC Director Dr. Thomas Frieden said the emergence and re-emergence of health threats is the "new normal," driven by the movement of people from one place to another, "and urbanization. Having lots of people close together make it ideal to spread the virus."

Since the virus was first identified in the 1940s, Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., asked whether it was the high frequency of birth defects in Brazil that drew the world's attention to the Zika Virus.

"Once you see a disease in which it explodes in a population, and all of a sudden you have so many cases that would otherwise be an unusual complication, then you start to pay attention," said Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease.

As of Wednesday, 508 cases of microcephaly have been confirmed in Brazil, with another 3,935 under investigation, according to published reports.

"That's why we're keeping a close eye on what is happening, because literally every week or month we learn something new and important about this," Fauci said.

The CDC offers public notices and updates on the virus, including translations in French, Spanish and Portuguese, at CDC.gov.

More information can be found through DHHS at www.dhhs.nh.gov/dphs/cdcs/zika.

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