

# Zika virus 'scarier' than first thought, thousands of Puerto Rico cases possible, officials say

By North America correspondent Michael Vincent, wires

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PHOTO: Health officials in the US say they need more funds to fight the Zika virus. (AFP: Marvin Recinos)

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The Zika virus is "scarier" than first thought and the mosquito that spreads it is now present in about 30 US states, top American health officials say.

## Key points:

- Billions in funds to fight Zika stalled in Congress
- Virus linked to broad complications with pregnancy
- Vaccine trials on track for September

The virus is linked to a broader set of complications with pregnancy, not just shrunken head or microcephaly, but also prematurity, blindness and other conditions, the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said.

Media player: "Space" to play, "M" to mute, "left" and "right" to seek.

VIDEO: How likely are North Queensland mosquitoes to transmit Zika virus? (ABC News)

There was deep concern about Puerto Rico where they may be hundreds of thousands of cases, principal deputy director of the CDC Dr Anne Schuchat said.

She said there was hope there would not be broad transmission across the US mainland, but that authorities needed to be prepared.

"Everything we look at with this virus seems to be a bit scarier than we initially thought," Dr Schuchat said.

"And so while we absolutely hope we don't see widespread local transmission in the continental US, we need the states to be ready for that. "We can't assume we're not going to have a big problem." A request by President Barack Obama for nearly \$US2 billion (\$2.6 billion) in assistance to fight the virus has stalled in Congress. Zika, linked to numerous cases of the birth defect microcephaly in Brazil, is spreading rapidly in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The White House said last week in the absence of the emergency funds it will redirect \$US589 million (\$775 million), mostly from money already provided by Congress to tackle the Ebola virus, to prepare for Zika before it begins to emerge in the continental US as the weather warms.

**Officials may be forced to redirect other research funds, Dr Anthony Fauci, director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said if Congress does not provide emergency Zika funding, US**

**officials likely would be forced to redirect money currently dedicated to research into malaria, tuberculosis and a universal flu vaccine. Zika virus explained: Zika virus was first isolated in 1947, in a rhesus monkey at Uganda's Zika Forest. So what is it, where is it, and how does it spread?**

"I don't have what I need right now," Dr Fauci said. "We'll have to start raiding other accounts, and very important research in other diseases is going to suffer, and suffer badly."

Dr Fauci said the first Zika vaccine candidate appeared to be on target to enter initial clinical trials in September. As Brazil prepares to host the Olympic games in August, the CDC has recommended that pregnant women avoid travelling to the country.

"We also want people to know that travel to the area may lead to 'silent' infections or infections with symptoms, and that following infections, it's very important to take precautions during sex not to spread the virus," Dr Schuchat said.

The World Health Organisation has said there is a strong scientific consensus that Zika can cause microcephaly, a condition in which babies are born with small heads that can result in developmental problems, as well as Guillain-Barre syndrome, a rare neurological disorder that can result in paralysis, though proof may take months or years.

Brazil said last week it had confirmed more than 1,046 cases of microcephaly, and considers most to be related to Zika infections in the mothers.