

ZIKA ILLNESSES ARE MILD AT WORST IN US TEENS, YOUNG CHILDREN

NEW YORK: A first look at US teens and young children who were infected with Zika suggests the virus typically causes at worst only a mild illness. Zika infection during pregnancy can cause severe brain-related birth defects. But the report seems to confirm health officials' belief that infections after birth in children are similar to infections in adults—most people don't feel sick, and some develop only mild symptoms like fever, rash, joint pain and red eyes.

Some experts say there's not enough data to answer questions about the virus's potential impact on the developing brains of infants and small children, however. The report, released Friday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is based on 158 infections from earlier this year in kids ages 1 month to 17 years.

All the children picked up the virus while traveling abroad, and the bulk of them were older kids in their teens. Only 16 were age 4 or younger and only four were under a year old. Experts are worried about very young children because



MARATHON, FLORIDA: In this Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016 file photo, *Aedes Aegypti* mosquito larvae swim in a container at the Florida Mosquito Control District Office. —AP

they can be more severely affected by infections in general, and because their brains are developing rapidly. "I'm really concerned about birth through the first birthday," said Dr. Carrie Byington, a University of Utah researcher who focuses on infections in children.

None died

None of the children studied died, and none developed a paralyzing condition seen in some infected adults called Guillain-Barre syndrome. But Guillain-Barre is rare, seen only once in every several thousand Zika illnesses in adults. It may be that kids can still get it, but there weren't enough cases for it to surface, said Dr. Ganeshwaran Mochida, a pediatric neurologist at Boston Children's Hospital.

Zika outbreaks have swept through Latin America and the Caribbean in the last year, but data on infections in children are limited. Experts have based conclusions about how infections progress in kids partly on what was seen

in 10 children in a Zika outbreak on a South Pacific island in 2007.

Zika is mainly spread by a tropical mosquito called *Aedes aegypti*, though it can also be spread through sex. Mosquitoes have been spreading the virus in Florida's Miami-Dade County, as well as in Puerto Rico and some other US territories. Most of the more than 3,600 reported infections in the 50 states, including about 800 pregnant women, have been seen in people who traveled to and were infected in Zika outbreak countries.

Also on Friday, the CDC updated its advice to US couples who may have been infected with Zika and are thinking of having a baby. They recommend men use condoms or refrain from sex for at least six months after returning from a Zika-hit area. That's longer than the eight weeks previously recommended because researchers have found that the virus can linger in semen for months. The recommendation for women to use protection remains eight weeks from possible Zika exposure. —AP

REPORT: OBAMA ADMINISTRATION FAILED TO FOLLOW HEALTH LAW

\$5 BILLION DISPUTE

WASHINGTON: The Obama administration failed to follow the president's health care law in a \$5 billion dispute over compensating insurers for high costs from seriously ill patients, Congress' investigative arm said Thursday.

The opinion from the Government Accountability Office is a setback for the White House and bolsters Republican complaints that administration officials bent the law as problems arose carrying out its complex provisions. The finding may complicate efforts to stabilize premiums in the law's insurance marketplaces, where about 11 million people get coverage.

The Obama administration said it "strongly disagrees" with the GAO's conclusion. At issue is how the administration has handled a little-known, but important program called "transitional reinsurance." Working in the background of the law's coverage expansion, the three-year program collects fees from employer and other private health insurance plans and channels the money to health plans that face large claims for treating patients with catastrophic medical

problems. The law specified that the fee would collect \$25 billion from 2014-2016, and \$5 billion of that would go directly to the Treasury. But when fee collections fell short, the Health and Human Services Department failed to allocate a share of the money to the Treasury, saying it would do so later as more money came in.

Grieved foul

Republicans cried foul and asked the GAO to examine the issue. On Thursday, Republicans got the ruling they had hoped for. "HHS lacks authority to ignore the statute's directive to deposit amounts (collected under the program) in the Treasury," the GAO's general counsel, Susan A. Poling, wrote.

The administration's interpretation of the law "is inconsistent with the plain language of the statute," she said. It didn't help the administration's case with GAO that the original HHS plan for distributing the fee money called for paying the Treasury.

Republicans accuse the Obama administra-

tion of shortchanging the Treasury to "bail out" the health care law.

"The administration should end this illegal scheme immediately, and focus on providing relief from the burdens of this law," Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., said in a statement. Barrasso is a leader on health care issues.

Previously, Republicans have complained that the administration flouted the law when it delayed a requirement that larger employers must offer coverage to their workers. Responding to Thursday's GAO opinion, the Obama administration said that the program was implemented "lawfully and in a transparent manner" and "helps to reduce premiums for consumers."

The GAO has no enforcement power over its ruling, but congressional opponents of the health law could use the finding to write legislation that forces HHS to pay the Treasury. Generally, lawmakers of both parties respect GAO's rulings on federal budget issues.

The reinsurance program is one of three financial backstops created by President Barack Obama's law to support insurers as they built their customer base in the new markets for subsidized private insurance. Reinsurance provides a safety net for insurers by helping to pay large claims, an important consideration for companies selling coverage to a customer pool they didn't know.

The marketplaces have been tough for insurers, due in part to less-than-promised support from a different government stabilization program. Insurers also say they've been swamped by higher-than-expected claims and by customers who sign up for coverage, use it on expensive care and then stop paying premiums. Major carriers such as UnitedHealth Group and Aetna have scaled back their role after forecasting annual losses that will top \$300 million.

The health insurance industry is concerned over the escalating dispute between Republicans in charge of Congress and the administration.

David Merritt, a vice president of America's Health Insurance Plans, said the purpose of reinsurance is to protect the most vulnerable patients and keep coverage affordable for everyone else. Any changes to the program "will put consumers and their coverage at risk," Merritt said. —AP



WASHINGTON: In this photo taken April 5, 2016, Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo. speaks on Capitol Hill. —AP

UTAH MAN MAY HAVE CONTRACTED ZIKA FROM DYING FATHER'S TEARS

SALT LAKE CITY: A Utah man who mysteriously contracted Zika from his infected father may have got it by touching his dad's tears or sweat with his bare hands, according to new research that found the unusual transmission method was likely caused by his dying father having 100,000 times the normal level of the virus.

The research done by University of Utah doctors and published Wednesday in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, doesn't give definite answers to why the father's levels were so high or why the son contracted the virus in a way not documented anywhere else. But it does offer new details about the events that led to a case that has puzzled researchers.

The father, 73, had been diagnosed with prostate cancer eight months before his June death, the report says. He was receiving radiation therapy and anti-androgen therapy, which may have made it easier for the virus to replicate, said Dr. Sankar Swaminathan, chief of the infectious diseases division at University of Utah Health Care. But Swaminathan said the cancer and treatment doesn't totally explain why the man had such extremely high levels.

Vague details

He became ill after returning from a three-week trip to the southwest coast of Mexico, his native country that he left in 2003 to move to the United States, the paper says. The report still doesn't provide the man's name or the exact spot in Mexico he visited.

In Mexico, he ate ceviche and soft boiled turtle eggs and went

fishing in the ocean, but those food choices and activities played no role in coming down with the virus, Swaminathan said. He and other family members were bitten by mosquitoes, leading him and several others to come down with Zika. His son, a healthy 38-year-old, became sick five days after visiting his father in the hospital and was diagnosed with Zika. He recovered and later told doctors that he had helped nurses care for his father, including wiping his eyes without gloves. None of the nurses or doctors who treated his father became sick, or did other family members. Health officials and researchers tested mosquitoes in the Salt Lake City area and didn't find any Zika-infected bugs.

The virus causes only a mild illness in most people. But during recent outbreaks in Latin America, scientists discovered that infection during pregnancy has led to severe brain-related birth defects.

Researchers in this new report concur with a previous assessment by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that the son contracted the virus through a new method other than the two main sources: mosquito bites and sexual activity with an infected person.

But Swaminathan said the findings don't mean people visiting Zika-infested areas and countries need to wear gloves all of the time. They believe the rare transmission happened primarily because the father's extremely high levels of the virus. "There's no risk of shaking hands with a person who has a typical Zika infection," said Swaminathan, who treated the two. —AP

COLORADO GIVES MARIJUANA CANDY A NEW LOOK TO AVOID CONFUSION

DENVER: Wondering if that brownie contains pot? Colorado has you covered. A requirement that edible marijuana products come with a diamond-shaped stamp and the letters T-H-C - not just on the packaging but on the brownies, candies and other edibles themselves - takes effect Saturday. The rule referencing marijuana's psychoactive ingredient was added after complaints that the treats look too much their non-intoxicating counterparts. It is the first such requirement in any legal weed state.

Colorado's new "universal symbol" for foods that contain marijuana is designed to give the treats a distinct look even after they're out of the packaging. In other words, a pot cookie being passed around a high school cafeteria no longer will look so innocent, giving parents a way to identify marijuana edibles without smelling or tasting them.

Other requirements

The stamping requirement comes in addition to exhaustive labeling and packaging rules that include childproof zippers and lids, along with warnings that the product should be kept away from children and not eaten before driving or while pregnant or nursing.

"We want to ensure that people genuinely know the difference between a Duncan Hines brownie and a marijuana brownie, just by looking at it," said state Rep. Jonathan Singer, a Democrat who sponsored the law requiring stamped edibles.

There are no numbers in Colorado or any marijuana state on how many children or adults accidentally eat pot. But a 2016 study tracing admissions at Children's Hospital Colorado just outside Denver found that more kids were treated for accidental pot ingestion after legalization, from 1.2 per 100,000 population two years prior to legalization to 2.3 per 100,000 population two years after legalization.

Marijuana ingestions remained relatively rare, though, with the hospital reporting 81 children treated for accidental pot ingestion between 2009 and 2015. Authors noted that "poor child supervision or product storage" was present in about a third of those cases. Still, reported accidental ingestions caught lawmakers' attention. The law was passed more than a

year ago but is just now taking effect because of difficulties implementing it. None of the other legal weed states has considered a universal symbol requirement for marijuana products themselves, as opposed to the packaging.

Candies and baked goods may be simple to stamp, but the label requirement gets a lot trickier for bulk items such as granola, or marijuana-infused sodas or powders that can be dissolved in water. The state ultimately settled on new packaging rules for those impossible-to-stamp items, requiring that sodas come in small single-serve bottles, for example.

Colorado also requires that edible packages contain the phrase, "Keep out of reach of children." At BlueKudu, which makes marijuana-infused chocolates, owners had to buy new molds for a line of candy bars that include flavors like mint chocolate, toffee almond

and coffee crunch. Company founder Andrew Schrot said that when he started his company in 2011 for medical marijuana customers, his pot treats looked like any other chocolate bars. But he said the switch to a recreational market in which new marijuana users were trying his products necessitated change. "This is not your normal chocolate bar. There's something different about it. You can tell just from looking at it," Schrot said.

Colorado's marijuana industry initially was hesitant about the change, pointing out in regulatory meetings that alcohol makers aren't required to dye their drinks funny colors to make sure parents don't let kids get hold of the booze. "Some of the industry expectation was, 'Let's keep it on the parents and the users in keeping it away from children or people who shouldn't use it,'" Schrot said. —AP



DENVER: In this Monday, Sept. 19, 2016, photo, candy bars wrapped in new packaging to indicate that the products contain marijuana are shown in the kitchen of BlueKudu candy in the historic Five Points District. —AP



BANGKOK: In this June 26, 2013, file photo, a Bangkok Metropolitan Administration worker fogs a home with mosquito repellent. —AP

THAILAND CONFIRMS SE ASIA'S FIRST ZIKA-LINKED BIRTH DEFECTS

BANGKOK: Authorities in Thailand have confirmed that two cases of babies with microcephaly, or abnormally small heads, were caused by the Zika virus, the first such cases found in Southeast Asia.

Dr. Prasert Thongcharoen, a senior Health Ministry official, said in a statement Friday that the linkage to Zika was confirmed by laboratory tests in two of three cases of babies afflicted with microcephaly. The results were inconclusive in the third case. The World Health Organization urged countries in the region to take stronger measures to contain the virus. The UN agency said the cases are the first of Zika-associated microcephaly in Southeast Asia.

"Zika virus infection is a serious threat to the health and wellbeing of a pregnant woman and her unborn child. Countries across the region must continue to strengthen measures aimed at preventing, detecting and responding to Zika virus transmission," WHO Southeast Asia regional director Dr. Poonam Khetrpal Singh said in a statement.

Zika generally causes a mild flu-like illness, but a major outbreak in Brazil last year revealed that it can result in severe birth defects when pregnant women are infected. The disease is spread primarily by mosquitoes, and WHO urged private citizens as well as governments to take strict

mosquito control measures. Mosquitoes are a constant concern in Thailand because they also transmit malaria, dengue fever and chikungunya. Statistics issued by Thai health officials show more than 300 confirmed Zika cases since the start of the year.

On Thursday, US health officials advised pregnant women to postpone travel to 11 countries in Southeast Asia because of Zika outbreaks. The advisory covered Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Maldives, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Zika has existed in some areas of Southeast Asia for years, and some residents may be immune. But it said a number of US travelers have become infected in the region in the last year.

WHO said travelers to areas with Zika virus outbreaks "should seek up-to-date advice on potential risks and appropriate measures to reduce the possibility of exposure to mosquito bites and sexual transmission of Zika." But it advised pregnant women "not to travel to areas of ongoing Zika virus transmission." "Pregnant women's sexual partners living in or returning from areas with Zika virus outbreaks should ensure safer sex or abstain from sex for the duration of their partner's pregnancy," it said. —AP