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30 November 2015

MEDIA RELEASE

CARPHA Continues to Appeal to Persons to Avoid Being Bitten By Mosquitoes

Port of Spain, Trinidad, 30 November 2015. The Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) is again urging persons to take every precaution to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes.

Earlier this month, CARPHA had confirmed five (5) case of Zika virus in a territory of the Caribbean Community. Zika is a viral disease, transmitted by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, the same insect vector for Dengue and Chikungunya. This is the first time Zika has been detected in CARICOM, leading CARPHA's Executive Director, Dr C James Hospedales, to emphasize the need for prevention and control measures to be taken in order to prevent transmission of the virus.

CARPHA's continued appeal to avoid being bitten is even more critical for women who are pregnant, as the Ministry of Health in Brazil investigates a link between the mosquito-borne Zika virus and an increased incidence of microcephaly. Microcephaly is a condition where the size of an infant's head is smaller than normal, because of slowed or incomplete brain development. While this may happen for a wide range of reasons, including inherited factors, it sometimes occurs as a result of exposure of the baby in the mother's womb to certain infections, contracted in the first few months of pregnancy. Zika virus is now suspected to be one of the infections that can increase the risk of this condition. CARPHA is therefore reminding all persons, and especially women who are pregnant, to protect themselves from mosquito bites by wearing long-sleeved clothing or long pants, using insect repellents, and sleeping under mosquito nets. It is also important to destroy all breeding sites for mosquitoes in and around the home.

While there is no evidence to date that Zika has spread to other Caribbean countries, Dr Hospedales, is calling on its Caribbean Member States to continue to strengthen their surveillance programmes. He said "Member States must remain vigilant and step up their vector control."

Given that a diagnosis of Zika can only be confirmed by laboratory testing, CARPHA has also provided Chief Medical Officers throughout the Region with guidelines for clinicians to follow when sending samples of suspected cases of the virus to the Agency for testing. Dr Hospedales added "Although we do not recommend any restrictions on travel due to Zika virus outbreaks, to reduce the risk of contracting the virus infection, travellers should minimise exposure to mosquito bites by taking preventative measures."

Dr Hospedales reiterated that the best way to protect yourself from this disease is to avoid mosquito bites and to prevent mosquitoes breeding in and around the home environment. In this regard, CARPHA is again urging the public to inspect their homes and yards weekly, and eliminate potential mosquito breeding sites indoors and outdoors by

keeping water drums and barrels tightly covered, and throwing out stagnant water from flower vases, old tyres, and other containers that might act as breeding sites.

The symptoms of the Zika virus are very similar to that of Dengue and Chikungunya and include fever, muscle and joint pain, conjunctivitis, headache, nausea, and rash. There is no vaccine or treatment for Zika, however, symptoms which last approximately four to seven days, are treatable. To relieve fever and pain associated with the virus, it is recommended that persons drink lots of fluids and take pain relievers such as paracetamol. Aspirin and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) should be avoided to reduce the risk of haemorrhage.

Within the next two weeks, CARPHA will launch a mobile game called *Zap-a-quito*, to assist in educating the public, particularly children, on the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito and its potential breeding sites.

An action pictogram to aid managing your yard and home environment can also be downloaded from the CARPHA website, <http://carpha.org/What-We-Do/Public-Health-Activities/Chikungunya> and used as a checklist.



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