

Health

Public health officials investigating possible new local Zika case beyond the Miami cluster



Zika Fight Goes Airborne

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1 / 19

By **Diane C. Lade and Martin Vassolo** · Contact Reporter
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State and federal health officials are investigating a new Zika case possibly transmitted by local mosquitoes outside the one-mile square area near downtown Miami that has been identified as ground zero for the virus in the United States.

Officials with the Florida Department of Health said the new case, in Miami-Dade County, was outside the 14-case cluster centered around Miami's trendy Wynwood Arts District. That cluster contains the first local cases identified in the continental United States and were confirmed last week.

Public health experts have predicted that the virus eventually would spread, although the U.S. probably will not see the large outbreaks occurring in subtropical countries like Brazil.

State health investigators believe active Zika transmission continues to be taking place only in the Wynwood cluster area, said department spokeswoman Sarah Revell.

There are no identified areas of active transmission in Broward County, Revell said Wednesday. State health officials said that investigations of two potential local cases in Broward identified last week continue.

All eyes were on Wynwood Tuesday, as Zika fears prompted one all-outdoors venue to temporarily close, another eatery to report cancellations, and top officials to meet in an attempt to reassure the public.

The actions came one day after federal officials recommended pregnant women not travel to the area due to new Zika virus cases.

The Wynwood Yard, which sprawls across several open lots and mixes live music and events with food and drink, announced Tuesday it was temporarily closed while its managers analyzed Zika's potential threat and safety measures.

"Business is important, but the well-being and safety of our guests and team members is more important," said restaurant spokeswoman Trina Sargalski.

Still, throughout Tuesday, there was an often-repeated answer to the question of Zika's potential impact: Everything is business as usual, and visitors should come on down.

Tom Curitore, executive director of the Wynwood Business Improvement District, said at a Tuesday press conference that its 300 retailer, gallery and restaurant members have not reported any slow-downs. When asked whether businesses should temporarily close their outdoor dining areas, Curitore said, "that's up to them."

Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Gimenez called the spread of the virus there a serious threat, but said it should be put into perspective. "We have [15] cases out of 2.7 million people," he said.

Adam Gersten, owner of Gramps bar, said none of his 30 employees so far have opted to stay home due to possible Zika exposure but that he would grant their request if asked. He said the bar has been busy.

However, Rocco Carulli, owner of the R House Wynwood restaurant who attended the meeting, said he had 50 cancellations on Saturday from large parties with reservations this week and next.

Carulli said his friends have been texting him nonstop, urging him to avoid being bitten. To top it off, he said, a Connecticut newspaper featured a photo of his building in a front-page Zika story.

He's worried, he said, about the world seeing Zika as "a Wynwood problem."

"As a business owner here, I don't think this is business as usual," he said.

Dr. Tom Frieden, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, on Monday advised that pregnant women, or women thinking about becoming pregnant, should avoid traveling to the Miami area as ongoing investigations suggest "there is a continued risk of active transmission of Zika." He stopped short, however, of calling for travel restriction recommendations for all of Miami-Dade County or Florida.

The virus, which has spread rapidly throughout subtropical countries in the western Hemisphere, can cause severe birth defects if pregnant women are infected.

The CDC also has recommended that pregnant women who have been in the area on or after June 15 be tested for the virus. Those thinking about becoming pregnant should delay conception for at least eight weeks after they visited the area, the CDC said. The agency said pregnant women and their sexual partners should either use protection or abstain from sex until the pregnancy is over.

After the CDC's advisory, public health officials in the United Kingdom suggested pregnant women and women who are thinking about starting a family should consider postponing non-essential trips to Florida.

Florida has the most confirmed Zika cases in the nation, with 406 reported as of Tuesday. Miami-Dade has 117 cases, Broward has 55 and **Palm Beach County** has 18.

Studies on the tourism impact of a public health crisis are contradictory, said Carolin Lusby, assistant professor at Florida International University's Chaplin School of Hospitality and Tourism Management.

A 2014 study found 90 percent of the 1,613 leisure travelers surveyed said an Ebola outbreak in the United States would not stop their travel plans, she said. Yet a 2013 study suggested Mexico lost about 1 million tourists and \$2 billion in income to the swine flu virus.

"You can see from the studies that negative hype does have a negative economic impact, but [destinations] can recover after some time," Lusby said.

Sargalski said The Wynwood Yard's management made their decision in light of the additional Zika cases, the CDC travel recommendations, and the "unique nature of our business, that we are 100 percent outdoors," she said.

The venue canceled two classes Tuesday: An essential oils class will be rescheduled, and a Naked Bites cooking class has been moved to Aug. 31.

She said The Wynwood Yard would "take a pause" and assess the ongoing Zika safety updates before announcing a reopening. The venue, which opened in November, has been following CDC recommendations, including keeping the property free of standing water, she said.

"At the end of the day, it will be a big cut in our business. But ethically, we felt it was the right thing to do," she said.

Aerial spraying over a 10-square-mile area, centered around Wynwood and targeting adult mosquitoes, was scheduled for Wednesday but canceled due to weather.

The CDC's Frieden has expressed concern over "moderately high numbers" of *Aedes aegypti* adult mosquitoes, the most common Zika carrier, and new larva continuing to be found in the Wynwood area.

"Aggressive mosquito control measures don't seem to be working as well as we would have liked," he said.

Among the challenges, Frieden said, is that the area has a wide mix of buildings and locations — from residential to industrial, from high end to economically stressed properties. So tailored mosquito control methods are needed to be effective, he said.

The Wynwood district's Clean Team, which regularly goes through the neighborhood cleaning up and helping visitors, will be working with the Florida Department of Health in Miami-Dade to provide repellent at businesses and during patrols, said district spokeswoman Kelly Penton.

"We continue to work to communicate with property owners and business members about what they need to do to keep their properties safe and free of standing water," she said.

dlade@sunsentinel.com or 954-356-4295

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