

**PUBLIC HEALTH**

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# Officials say state needs to create other Zika virus tests

**Task force examines need for readiness for disease outbreak**

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AUSTIN — State and local health laboratories have ramped up their ability to tell Texans who have bloodshot eyes, fever, rashes and joint pain whether they have the Zika virus.

But scientists at the state’s taxpayer-funded medical schools and several public health officials said Wednesday that they still have much work to do to gear up a second kind of test.

It could tell Texans who have no active symptoms whether they contracted Zika in the past 12 weeks.

The more complex “serologic” tests are important and will be

in much higher demand if, as public health leaders say is likely, the Zika virus starts being transmitted by mosquitoes native to Texas.

In that event, more pregnant women who fear birth defects will demand the tests, officials said at the first meeting of a panel Gov. Greg Abbott recently named to examine readiness for outbreaks of infectious disease.

“This is the scenario that we’re seeing. Pregnant women say, ‘Oh my God, I was in Brazil,’ ”and while there or soon afterward may have had a fever, said microbiologist James Le Duc, director of the Galveston National Laboratory at the University of Texas Medical Branch.

“ ‘Did I have Zika? Can you test?’ ” Le Duc quoted the women as asking.

Unfortunately, he said he has to tell them, “If you’re clinically sick, we can diagnose it. But if you just have a history of [fever-inducing] disease and you’re worried about it, we don’t really have a test.”

Le Duc and other members of the 31-person Task Force on Infectious Disease Preparedness and Response said it would be valuable to scientists if some of the patients who have confirmed cases of Zika would give a blood sample. That way, they said, scientists could work up tests for the antibodies Zika creates.

As of Wednesday, there were 21 confirmed cases of Zika in Texas, state health commissioner John Hellerstedt told the task force.

Of those, 20 are people who traveled to other countries where there are Zika outbreaks, he said. The other confirmed case, a

Dallas woman, “was likely the result of sexual contact with a person who traveled” to Venezuela, said Department of Health Services spokeswoman Carrie Williams.

Hellerstedt said the best model for fighting Zika may be dengue, a mosquito-borne tropical virus. Texas has been combating dengue for decades. Getting rid of pools of standing water, spraying places where mosquitoes breed, using insect repellent and installing and repairing screens in houses are ways to prevent both dengue and Zika.

There have been no reports of local transmission of dengue in Texas since 2013, Hellerstedt said. That year, there were 53 confirmed cases in the state, about half of which were locally acquired. In 2014, Mexico had 679 confirmed cases of dengue along the U.S. border, he said.

Texas Secretary of State Carlos Cascos, a task force member, commended joint efforts under way between Hidalgo County and Mexican officials to prevent Zika virus transmission.

The state lab in Austin, county labs in Dallas, Fort Worth and Houston and the Galveston lab are among several Texas facilities that have added polymerase chain reaction testing capability — the simpler test for people with Zika-like symptoms — “in anticipation of a possible surge in demand,” said Williams, the department spokeswoman.

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