

Zika virus 'could well' spread to southern Europe, expert warns

THE devastating Zika virus could spread to Europe and pose a massive challenge to public health officials, an expert in communicable diseases has warned.

Professor Ron Behrens, of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, has said the world needs to be prepared to cope with outbreaks of Zika, Ebola and other deadly viruses as they migrate around our increasingly connected world.

The Zika virus can spread from pregnant women to their unborn children and can cause a condition called microcephaly.

Microcephaly is a rare nervous system disorder which causes a baby's head to be small and not fully developed and, as a result, significant brain damage.

Zika is mild and only around one in five people experience symptoms. Although it can be particularly dangerous for pregnant women, for most people Zika is a mild disease.

Zika was first identified in the African country of Uganda, where it is transmitted to people primarily through the bite of an infected *Aedes* species mosquito (*Ae. aegypti* and *Ae. albopictus*). These are the same mosquitoes that spread dengue and chikungunya viruses.

This is known as transmission by vector, whereby diseases are spread by insects and other arthropods.



Zika is usually spread by mosquitoes - although it can also be transmitted via sexual contact.

However, it is believed to have spread to other continents as a result of infected humans travelling there, after which it began to be spread by mosquitoes once again.

The most recent outbreak, in 2015-2016, saw an estimated 1.5million people infected in Brazil, with other cases in other countries in both South and North America.

So far Europe has been spared an outbreak - but Professor Behrens said if the virus begins using mosquitoes as vectors on the continent, the situation could get MUCH more serious.

He said: "There have already been examples of vectors taking a disease from one part of the world to another.



GETTY

A health worker at an Ebola quarantine centre in Congo

“Dengue fever, for instance, originated in Asia, but has spread to South America because as a result breeding in water inside tyres which were shipped there.

“These things are happening and they can happen again.”

“The Zika virus could well spread to Southern Europe, which why public health and surveillance bodies have got to catch these outbreaks early.”

Nor does the bad news stop there.

The Democratic Republic of Congo this week announced an outbreak of Ebola after the confirmation of two more cases on Tuesday.

Ebola, unlike Zika, is a viral hemorrhagic fever which is spread by human contact, and is therefore easier to monitor.

However, Mr Behrens said it could nevertheless “easily” spread outside west Africa, where it has up until now been largely contained.

He said: “It could happen.

“If you had an outbreak and it spread to a slum in a big city in central America then it becomes very difficult to control its spread.”

Professor Behrens said the World Health Organisation and other national and international health bodies were taking the situation seriously.

He said: "Outbreaks are inevitable - the reaction depends on the quality of resources made available for public health."

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