

During the first week of May, Governor Greg Abbott and Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) Commissioner Dr. John Hellerstedt sent a letter to County Judges and Mayors across the state asking for their continued assistance in combatting locally-transmitted Zika viruses in Texas.

“With the ongoing risk posed by Zika, we are requesting your continued assistance in delaying locally transmitted Zika virus in Texas this year by promoting precautions to prevent mosquito bites and taking action to reduce mosquito breeding grounds in your communities,” read the letter. “We expect local mosquito transmission to resume and persist as the weather warms and mosquito activity increases. The Texas Department of State Health Services stands ready to provide technical expertise as you prepare your locality’s Zika response plans or prepare to conduct community engagement efforts,” the letter continued.

In addition to the letter, Governor Abbott and Commissioner Hellerstedt hosted a Zika prevention roundtable with elected leaders and health officials on Friday, May 5th, at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. The roundtable allowed local leaders to discuss prevention efforts as the state prepares to enter the height of mosquito season.

The letter also provided important tips for individuals to protect themselves from mosquitoes at home, work, and during outdoor recreation or traveling, including the following:

- Consistently use mosquito repellent when outside, wear long sleeves and pants, and use air conditioning or make sure window screens will keep mosquitoes out of the home and other indoor environments.
- Pregnant women should follow CDC advice to avoid traveling to locations with sustained local Zika transmission, including all areas of Mexico.
- Pregnant women and their sexual partners who have traveled to those areas should use condoms or avoid sexual contact during the course of the pregnancy.
- Texans statewide should pick up trash and dump out containers that could hold standing water in and around their homes, schools, outdoor recreation venues and businesses to deny mosquitoes a place to lay their eggs.

The letter also noted that DSHS continues to coordinate with local health departments across the state to plan for and respond to Zika. DSHS’ website dedicated to Zika, www.TexasZika.org, has a variety of information and materials available in English and Spanish, such as a Zika communications toolkit for organizations interested in sharing important information with their constituents, including pregnant women, travelers and individuals who work outdoors. The public is free to send any questions to TexasZika@dshs.texas.gov.

Abbott and Hellerstedt encouraged all communities to take action now to address the threat of Zika virus in Texas and said they believe that together the impact of Zika and other mosquito-borne diseases can be reduced by the state and local entities. They stressed the need to prepare and begin our efforts before weather conditions allow mosquitoes to proliferate. The pair thanked the letter’s recipients for assistance in this important public health matter.

The City’s website also has a page of links and precautions on infectious diseases, including Zika, at <http://www.huntsvilletx.gov/InfectiousDisease> or <http://www.huntsvilletx.gov/Zika>. Below is a list of measures communities and individuals can take to protect themselves against mosquito bites and Zika virus.

Zika Virus Protection and Prevention

Measures to Protect Communities from Zika Virus

- conduct neighborhood outreach about active precautions individuals can take to protect themselves and their families from mosquito bites;
- initiate or enhance monitoring and surveillance of mosquito activity;
- develop a local contingency plan for mosquito abatement and surveillance, and plan for additional control measures if needed;
- keep public drains and ditches clear of weeds and trash so water will not collect;
- implement efforts to clean up illegal dump sites and collect heavy trash; and
- encourage people to report illegal dumpsites and standing water, and respond quickly to these complaints.

Measures for Individuals to Protect Themselves from Mosquito Bites

- wear insect repellent,
- cover up with long-sleeved shirts and long pants,
- keep mosquitoes out with air conditioning or intact window screens, and
- limit outdoor activities during peak mosquito times.

Measures for Individuals to Prevent Mosquito Breeding

- At least weekly, carefully check the area around your home, school or workplace for mosquito breeding areas:
 - clear and empty gutters;
 - empty or get rid of cans, buckets, old tires, pots, plant saucers and other containers that hold water;
 - remove standing water around structures and from flat roofs;
 - change water in pet dishes daily;
 - rinse and scrub vases and other indoor water containers weekly;
 - change water in wading pools and bird baths several times a week;
 - maintain backyard pools or hot tubs;
 - cover trash containers;
 - water lawns and gardens carefully so water does not stand for several days;
 - screen rain barrels and openings to water tanks or cisterns; and
 - treat front and back door areas of homes with residual insecticides if mosquitoes are abundant nearby.
- If mosquito problems persist, consider pesticide applications for vegetation around the home.

TexasZika.org Communications Resources

- Zika Communications Toolkit:
<http://www.texaszika.org/docs/TexasDSHSZikaCommunicationsToolkitII.pdf>
- Sharable graphics for social media: <http://www.texaszika.org/materials.htm#toolkit>
- Fact sheets and posters: <http://texaszika.org/materials.htm>