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# With malaria cases confirmed in Florida, here's what Tallahassee residents should know



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With Independence Day just around the corner, plans for outdoor fun are underway, but state and local officials warn Florida residents to be leery of a certain pesky intruder: mosquitoes.

Accounting for the recent resurgence of malaria in the state, Leon County is working with the Florida Department of Health to educate the community with best practices for the summer nights ahead.

Four malaria cases were confirmed and treated in Sarasota County over Memorial Day Weekend, marking the country's first locally generated outbreak of this disease in 20 years. The health department sent a statewide mosquito-borne illness advisory Monday.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also issued a health advisory Monday alerting physicians and health departments across the country of the cases in Florida, as well as one reported case in Texas. All five cases were successfully treated.

The department is taking a "proactive approach," said Jae Williams, a spokesperson for the Florida DOH. It is working hand-in-hand with local governments throughout the state to address the situation and make recommendations for residents and visitors as the holiday weekend kicks off, Williams said.

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"Going into the [Fourth of July], we know you're going to be having fun, and we know you're going to be recreating outside in particular, but take the proper precautions," he said.

Starting Saturday and continuing through next week, Tallahassee's mosquito forecast is projected to be severe, according to an forecast provided by OFF!, an insect repellent brand.

"Leon County Mosquito Control regularly conducts surveillance at sites for the presence of mosquito larvae and pupae," said Kianna Gilley, a spokesperson for Leon County. "[It] treats areas in the community where mosquito activity is present through truck spraying, larvicide applications to water bodies, and domestic inspections."

To help curb mosquito breeding and spread of the potentially life-threatening illness, the DOH is asking people to drain and cover standing water from their yards. This could be anything thing from a bird bath to a kiddie pool, Williams said.

Another good precaution is to cover your body, he said, whether that be with clothes or proper bug sprays.

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**Malaria in the US:** With local cases in Florida, Texas, what to know about symptoms, treatment

**More:** Sarasota residents react to malaria outbreak; some remain unaware or unfazed

## What is malaria?

It is important to take proactive measures, especially in the summer, and be aware of the potential dangers that come with these confirmed cases and malaria itself, said Dr. George Rust, director of the Florida State University Center for Medicine and Public Health.

Malaria is a parasite that is only transmitted to humans via Anopheles mosquitoes, Rust said. It cannot be spread from human to human.

What makes these four documented malaria cases so uncommon is that they are from Florida native mosquitoes, Rust said. Typically, reported instances are from individuals who just traveled to countries where malaria is more prevalent.

## What are the symptoms of malaria?

The disease resembles many flus and the common cold, so it can be hard to decide if your symptoms are benign or an onset of malaria, he said. Typical symptoms include high fevers,

chills, headaches, and sometimes vomiting and nausea.

If left untreated it can lead to anemia, liver and kidney failure, he said. If you suspect you have malaria, go see a provider, he said, the disease is very treatable.

Rust said a good way to distinguish the disease from other common illnesses is if you know you've been around a lot of mosquitos and had bites paired with the recurring fevers. Also, if the whites of a person's eyes turn yellow in addition to the other symptoms, this is a good tell-tale sign for malaria.

## **Will malaria cases become widespread in Florida or the U.S.?**

News of malaria generating within the state can be alarming, but it is important to keep the relative risk in perspective, Rust said.

It is unlikely the disease will become widespread from these confirmed cases, Buckner said. The outbreak should stay within the area, because yes, mosquitos do fly but not great distances, she said.

"And they only live so long," she said. "Generally, an adult female mosquito only lives about four weeks. So, there's only so many cases that are likely going to happen because the infected mosquito is only going to live so long when it comes to [the mosquito that transmits malaria]."

With threat levels generally low, it is still good to pay attention to public health officials and what they're monitoring, she said.

## **How do officials monitor mosquito-borne illnesses?**

"One of the challenges with public health is when you do prevention well, nothing happens," Rust said. "So, people don't necessarily value it, but it's always going on behind the scenes, this constant surveillance."

A popular method counties across the state have used for years, including Leon County, use to track the transmission rate of mosquito-borne illnesses is sentinel chickens.

Counties keep chickens and test their blood weekly to detect antibodies of different viruses like West Nile, Eastern equine encephalitis and St. Louis encephalitis, Buckner said. The chickens cannot, however, detect transmission of malaria in populations because the species of malaria that infects humans does not cause malaria in birds.

But in the counties that do utilize this surveillance method, it very effective, Buckner said, for preemptively handling outbreaks of the detectable viruses.

“The sentinel chickens have been around for a while,” Rust said. “They’re trained professionals.”