As Temperatures Rise, Mosquito-Borne Disease Spreads

A warmer, wetter climate is triggering a worldwide outbreak of mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue fever; medical experts warn that more than 5 billion people could soon be at risk.

Keywords

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BRIAN WILLIAMS, anchor:
We're back and we have a report tonight on the intersection of the environment and health, specifically the spread of a disease that may soon include parts of the US. This story is also related to the climate change debate and that global summit going on in Copenhagen. From Malaysia, NBC's Ian Williams has tonight's report in this week's series we're calling A PERFECT STORM.

IAN WILLIAMS reporting:
On the front line the battle against the mosquitoes which call dengue fever can be intense and personal. It feels like a war against mosquitoes.

Unidentified Man #1: Yeah. Yeah, it's a war.

I. WILLIAMS: But it's a war the world is losing. A warmer and wetter climate is triggering more outbreaks of mosquito-born diseases. Medical experts warn that more than five billion people could soon be at risk from dengue fever alone.

Dr. SAMLEE PLIANBANGSCHANG (World Health Organization): Dengue will be a global problems in term of health because of a change in the climate.

I. WILLIAMS: Dengue used to be a disease largely of Southeast Asia. Now it's spread to more than 100 countries, including Australia, and in Africa and South America. Last month it reappeared in Florida for the first time in more than 50 years.

Unidentified Woman: (Foreign language spoken)

I. WILLIAMS: The number of cases worldwide now tops 100 million per year with around 25,000 deaths.

Dr. ADEEBA KAMARULZAMAN (University of Malaya Medical Center): Are they in here?

I. WILLIAMS: In Malaysia, Dr. Adeeba Kamarulzaman treats the most severe cases of what's sometimes called break-bone disease...
Dr. KAMARULZAMAN: Breathe.
I. WILLIAMS: ...because of the intense joint pains it can cause. There's no vaccine. The more often you have it, the more severe it can be.
Dr. KAMARULZAMAN: (Foreign language spoken)
I. WILLIAMS: And it's no longer a disease just of children.
Dr. KAMARULZAMAN: Certainly we're seeing more and more adults being admitted with dengue and with severe forms of dengue, as well.
I. WILLIAMS: You've never had anything like this?
Unidentified Man #2: Never, never. Never, ever in my life.
I. WILLIAMS: Groundbreaking research in this Kuala Lumpur laboratory confirms the potential impact of rising temperatures from climate change. It shows a rise of just four degrees Fahrenheit could almost double the speed at which the dengue virus develops in a mosquito.
Dr. LOKMAN HAKIM SULAIMAN (Institute for Medical Research): The incubation period of the virus becomes shorter, so they become very infected much faster.
I. WILLIAMS: Other new research suggests mosquitoes bite more frequently in hotter temperatures. And because the dengue-carrying Aedes mosquito breeds in stagnant water, a less predictable rainy season means it's now a year-round threat. Health officials scour the city, pouncing on everything from plant pots to abandoned building sites, their weapons ranging from guppies that feast on mosquito larvae to a chemical fog. This has been the main weapon in the fight against dengue. But with mosquitos becoming more resistant, they're having to find other ways to take them on.
Mr. SAZALY ABUBAKAR (University of Malaya): The virus is evolving. Mosquitoes is adapting to the environment, but we are not adapting fast enough to these changes. This is what we have been storing over the last 30 years.
I. WILLIAMS: By examining the DNA of past dengue viruses, Dr. Sazaly aims to predict how it will strike in the future. That, he says, may put a vaccine within reach.
Mr. ABUBAKAR: There is no way we are going to use our bare arms and legs...
I. WILLIAMS: He says we've got to get smart to defeat one of mankind's most enduring enemies, whose global march is being aided and abetted by a changing climate. Ian Williams, NBC News, Kuala Lumpur.