

Statement by the Hon. Minister of Health
Rudyard Spencer
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INTRODUCTION

As we all know, we are facing a serious drought across the island. This drought has affected a number of sectors and health has not been spared. The Ministry of Health is concerned as we believe that the current conditions are influencing the disease profile of the country.

Our surveillance has detected an increase in some communicable illnesses, namely Gastroenteritis, Malaria and Dengue Fever. We believe that the current drought period will serve to exacerbate the spread of these illnesses.

Let me give you a breakdown of what we have been seeing in terms of occurrence of these illnesses.

DENGUE FEVER

As at the end of January 2010, there were 19 confirmed cases of Dengue fever compared to 10 cases for the same period in 2009. This is an increase of almost 100 percent. Of this number, three were confirmed cases of Dengue Haemorrhagic Fever which can lead to death.

To be cautious, we had instructed all parishes to heighten their surveillance for Dengue Fever since October 2009 when an outbreak was reported in Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

MALARIA

This year, the Ministry of Health confirmed the first locally transmitted malaria case in January. Since the start of the year, we have had four (4) confirmed cases of the disease.

Two were locally transmitted and two were imported. Two of the cases were detected in the Mountain View Avenue Area, one in St. Elizabeth and the other in a resident of a community in the Red Hills Road Area of St. Andrew.

Last year there were a total of 15 cases, 6 of which were in Kingston and St. Andrew. The Ministry's concern is heightened by the fact that this is the first time that we are detecting transmission in an area of Kingston outside of Kingston 11, 12 and 13.

Teams from the respective Health Departments have been out in the field doing house to house fever surveillance in the affected areas. Anti Malaria treatment has been administered for the confirmed persons and Malaria control and eradication activities have been implemented in the communities.

A positive breeding site for the Anopheles mosquito, which transmits the parasite, was identified and destroyed. Fogging and public education have also continued.

GASTROENTERITIS

The total number of gastroenteritis cases up to the end of January was 3,890, which is a 30 percent increase over the 2989 cases reported during the same period last year.

Between January 24 and 30 this year, our surveillance detected 1,454 cases. We are particularly concerned about children under 5 years old, who seem to be most affected. We have seen 2019 cases of gastroenteritis island-wide in this age group as at the end of January.

The breakdown of the total number of cases by parish is as follows: Kingston & St. Andrew – 1,202; St. Thomas – 235; Portland – 160; St. Mary – 263; St. Ann – 202; Trelawny – 80; St. James – 212; Hanover – 78; Westmoreland – 150; St. Elizabeth – 62; Manchester – 389; Clarendon – 571; St. Catherine – 286;

Although this is the period in which we expect to see an increase in cases of gastroenteritis in keeping with that seen in the Northern Hemisphere, the Ministry is very concerned especially given the current drought conditions.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

Our team of Health Educators continues to work in the field to provide information and resource material to communities. The Ministry of Health is currently in the midst of seeking funding to execute a national hand washing campaign. We have already completed the printed material with the assistance of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

We believe that frequent and proper hand washing is important to assist in stemming the spread of viral and bacterial illnesses. We will also continue to emphasize ways in which persons should wash hands properly even with limited running water.

The use of alcohol based hand sanitizers is also advised to reduce the spread of viruses and bacteria.

We are currently running 3 radio commercials - 2 on gastroenteritis and 1 hand washing - on 6 radio stations.

The Ministry is making efforts to further educate the public about the diseases of concern as well as waste disposal and water storage and treatment options. This would ensure that they are equipped with the necessary information to allow for the use and consumption of safe water and prevent harbouring mosquito breeding sites.

Additional information on how to make water safe can be had from the Ministry of Health and through our public service announcements.

The Ministry of Health is appealing to members of the public to cooperate with the health officials and take their advice so that we can try and contain the spread of these diseases as much as possible.

Thank you.