

Publication: First Post Online

Date: 8 June 2022

Headline: Explained: Why Singapore's dengue emergency is a climate change wake-up call for the world

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The city-state has already exceeded 11,000 cases — far beyond the 5,258 it reported throughout 2021 — before 1 June, when its peak dengue season traditionally begins. And climate change is poised to make things worse in coming years, say experts



Representational Image: ANI

Singapore has said it is battling a dengue emergency.

The city-state has already registered 11,000 cases of the seasonal disease this year – more than double of what it reported in all of 2021 – that too before 1 June when peak dengue season usually begins.

Minister of State for Sustainability and the Environment Desmond Tan, who is also Minister of State for Home Affairs, said during an inspection: "We are seeing a steep increase in the number of cases by the week... it's an emergency phase now that we need to deal with to prevent further increase in the incidence of dengue cases."

Let's take a closer look at why this is happening, and what experts say:

Why is this happening?

As per Straits Times, Singapore's National Environment Agency (NEA) has put the surge in dengue cases partially down to a high *Aedes aegypti* mosquito population, which may be due to recent warm, rainy and humid weather.

Singapore's tropical climate is already natural breeding ground for the *Aedes* mosquitoes that carry the dengue virus.

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Singapore's dengue surge is the result of multiple factors like the recent warm, wet weather as well as a new dominant virus strain, said Ruklanthi de Alwis, a senior research fellow at the Duke-NUS Medical School and an expert in emerging infectious diseases, told CNN.

And climate change is poised to make things worse.

As per CNN, experts say the outbreak in Singapore has been made worse by recent extreme weather, and, worse, could be a preview of what is to come elsewhere as more countries experience prolonged hot weather spells and thundery showers.

"Past predictive modeling studies have shown that global warming due to climate change will eventually expand the geographical areas (in which mosquitoes thrive) as well as the length of dengue transmission seasons," de Alwis said.

"We will not be able to eradicate dengue (because) the constant weather extremes create the perfect breeding conditions for mosquitoes," said climate scientist Winston Chow from the College of Integrative Studies at Singapore Management University.

Chow, who has contracted dengue fever twice, lamented the escalating scale of the problem. "In terms of adaptation, Singapore has excellent health care infrastructure and countless policies in place to reduce the risks -- but there's only so much that it can do," he said, as per CNN.

Dengue increasing worldwide

In a global dengue report in January 2022, the WHO warned that the disease is now endemic in more than 100 countries and that cases had increased "30 fold in the last 50 years."

"Not only is the number of cases increasing as the disease spreads to new areas but explosive outbreaks are occurring," the report stated.

What can residents do?

Singapore's National Environment Agency has advised residents to break up hardened soil, lift and empty flowerpot plates, overturn pails and wipe their rims dry in order to break disease transmission and prevent Aedes mosquito breeding.

They should also change water in vases, keep roof gutters clean and place BTI insecticide inside, which is used to kill mosquito larvae.

Those staying in dengue clusters should also spray insecticide in dark corners around their homes and apply insect repellent regularly, the agency added.

Singapore's Ministry of Health has advised people who have symptoms of dengue to see a general practitioner immediately.

Most cases can be managed effectively by primary care doctors, and do not require hospitalisation or intensive care, it added.

However, some people may develop severe dengue, which can result in death, it warned.

Those who want to get the dengue vaccine, known as Dengvaxia, should consult their doctor first.

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It is approved in Singapore for people aged between 12 and 45, but is not suitable for people who have not been previously infected with dengue.