'Zika virus found in M'sia in 1969'

Expert: Safety measures similar to dengue's

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PETALING JAYA: Zika is an existing virus in Malaysia and the steps needed to prevent its infection are similar to those adopted for dengue, said a researcher.

World Health Organisation's (WHO) Collaborating Centre for Arbovirus Reference and Research director Prof Dr Sazaly Abu Bakar said the Zika virus was isolated from mosquitoes in 1969 in Bentong, Pahang.

However, the origin of the virus discovered in Malaysia was not known since it was not studied to determine its genome, he said.

"It may have come from Africa or could be native to our country and found in our monkeys and mosquitoes," he added.

Dr Sazaly said they had not seen the virus since 1969 because no one had looked for it.

According to WHO, Zika virus is an emerging mosquito-borne virus that was first identified in Uganda in 1947 in the rhesus monkeys.

It was subsequently identified in humans in 1952 in Uganda and Tanzania. Outbreaks of Zika virus disease have been recorded in Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific.

Asked why the world had had the virus for so long but the issue of babies born with small brains (microcephaly) only started to emerge recently, Dr Sazaly said the size of an outbreak possibly amplified the otherwise rare event.

"The ways to prevent Zika infection are similar to the methods used in dengue prevention," he said.

"If we tackle dengue, we tackle Zika too."

Universiti Malaya research consultant Prof Emeritus Datuk Dr Lam Sai Kit said since the Zika virus was first isolated in 1969 by a team of American scientists, a German traveller was diagnosed with mild Zika infection upon her return to Germany in September 2014, after visiting Sabah.

"It looks like Zika has been around this region for decades and accounts for mild infections," he said.

There was still no conclusive evidence that Zika virus was the cause of microcephaly although the link was strong, he said.

"If microcephaly is indeed caused by Zika virus, then the present strain in Brazil has possibly undergone changes and become more neurogenic.

"One needs to then study the genes of this strain and compare the findings with past strains," he said.