Jacob Borg

The dry spell this winter may very well be a mixed blessing, as although it has prompted farmers to pray for rain it has also helped keep the Zika-carrying Asian tiger mosquito away.

University of Malta rural scientists lecturer David Mifsud told The Sunday Times of Malta that the chances of a Zika virus outbreak in Malta are very remote.

Dr Mifsud explained that only two mosquitoes are capable of carrying the Zika virus: the Aedes aegypti mosquito and the Asian tiger mosquito.

"It is good to be attentive, but people must be equipped with all the facts. The chances of a Zika outbreak in Malta are very remote and there is really no need for alarm."

"The Aedes aegypti mosquito is not found in Malta, and sightings of the Asian tiger mosquito have been rare this winter due to the lack of rains," Dr Mifsud said.

People infected by the Zika virus disease usually have symptoms that can include mild fever, skin rashes, conjunctivitis, muscle and joint pain, malaise or headache. The virus normally lasts for two to seven days but it can lead to birth defects if pregnant women are infected. A 32-year-old man is currently being kept in isolation at home after travelling to American Samoa in January and subsequently contracting the virus on January 29.

He arrived in Malta on February 3 by which time he had no fever and the virus was no longer contagious.

The Zika virus to spread in Malta, a female mosquito would have to bite a person who has already been infected. The same mosquito would then need to bite someone else in order to expose them to the virus. People infected with Zika carry sufficient amounts of the virus in their bloodstream to infect a mosquito from anywhere between three to 12 days after the initial infection.

This short window coupled with mosquitoes' two-week life-span make the risk of transmission in Malta remote, Dr Mifsud says.

Dr Mifsud advised people to take basic precautions like covering their water tanks and avoiding areas with stagnant water.

Last week, a man in the United States was reportedly infected by the Zika virus after having sexual intercourse, yet Mifsud dismissed this as a "far-fetched and isolated" report.

A spokesman for the Health Ministry said the Maltese authorities "are in constant contact with the World Health Organisation and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, to assess, inform and keep updated with all the necessary requirements to control the Zika virus".

The Maltese health authorities are setting up a working group to monitor and advise about Zika virus precautions in Malta. A 24/7 helpline has been set up and can be reached on 2132 4086.

Keith Micallef

An acute dry spell which four centuries ago had brought Gozo's population to its knees was a blessing in disguise for a deprived unmarried woman who received a large sum of money raised during a religious pilgrimage.

As a sign of their devotion the faithful had to be celebrated at the Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in Qala. From these historical documents it also emerged that Gakbina would receive 10 oznz on her wedding day, with the remaining amount being donated to her on the feast of St John the Baptist, patron saint of the Knights of Malta.

Another condition was that the marriage had to be celebrated at the Church of St Nicholas of Mira at the Citadel. The choice of venue was no coincidence at this was the patron saint of those facing unfavourable circumstances, like the fortune of the people at the time.

Ten years later, however, this church was demolished and built from scratch on the orders of Bishop Baldaassare Caplari who decreed that it should be dedicated to the Flight into Egypt, the biblical event in which Joseph fled to Egypt with Mary and infant son Jesus to escape from King Herod's infanticide spree.

The church, which was restored two years ago, is also home to one of the most valuable titular paintings, which is now exhibited at the Gozo Cathedral Museum.

A biologist works with Aedes mosquito cells in the laboratory of Biology at the University of Campinas in Brazil. The university's scientists are developing a test to detect and identify the presence of genetic material associated with the Zika virus, dengue and Chikungunya in samples saliva, blood or urine.

Dr Mifsud explained that only mosquitoes are capable of carrying the Zika virus: the Aedes aegypti mosquito and the Asian tiger mosquito.

"It is good to be attentive, but people must be equipped with all the facts. The chances of a Zika outbreak in Malta are very remote and there is really no need for alarm."

"The Aedes aegypti mosquito is not found in Malta, and sightings of the Asian tiger mosquito have been rare this winter due to the lack of rains," Dr Mifsud said.

People infected by the Zika virus disease usually have symptoms that can include mild fever, skin rashes, conjunctivitis, muscle and joint pain, malaise or headache. The virus normally lasts for two to seven days but it can lead to birth defects if pregnant women are infected. A 32-year-old man is currently being kept in isolation at home after travelling to American Samoa in January and subsequently contracting the virus on January 29.

He arrived in Malta on February 3 by which time he had no fever and the virus was no longer contagious.

The Zika virus to spread in Malta, a female mosquito would have to bite a person who has already been infected. The same mosquito would then need to bite someone else in order to expose them to the virus. People infected with Zika carry sufficient amounts of the virus in their bloodstream to infect a mosquito from anywhere between three to 12 days after the initial infection.

This short window coupled with mosquitoes' two-week life-span make the risk of transmission in Malta remote, Dr Mifsud says.

Dr Mifsud advised people to take basic precautions like covering their water tanks and avoiding areas with stagnant water.

Last week, a man in the United States was reportedly infected by the Zika virus after having sexual intercourse, yet Mifsud dismissed this as a "far-fetched and isolated" report.

A spokesman for the Health Ministry said the Maltese authorities "are in constant contact with the World Health Organisation and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, to assess, inform and keep updated with all the necessary requirements to control the Zika virus".

The Maltese health authorities are setting up a working group to monitor and advise about Zika virus precautions in Malta. A 24/7 helpline has been set up and can be reached on 2132 4086.