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Health Department Offers Advice Regarding Mosquito Protection

With the hot, muggy weather comes an abundance of mosquitoes. The problem, according to Dee Ann Schippert, Public Health Administrator, for the Iroquois County Public Health Department, is that mosquitoes may also transmit serious and sometimes fatal diseases in humans and their pets. “Mosquito bites are not only irritating”, said Schippert, “they can lead to serious illness or even death if the mosquito transmits West Nile virus to a person.”

Schippert indicated that Encephalitis is the disease transmitted by mosquitoes that is of the most concern. According to Schippert, encephalitis is an inflammation of the brain that can be caused by viruses. “Not all types of encephalitis viruses are carried by mosquitoes,” said Schippert. “However, mosquitoes do carry at least three kinds of viruses that cause human disease in Illinois.” Schippert explained that the La Crosse encephalitis virus is normally an infection of squirrels and chipmunks; affecting mainly children. St Louis encephalitis virus is an infection of wild birds and affects mostly older adults. The West Nile Virus, which has been more widely discussed in the news recently, is a disease of birds that can cause encephalitis primarily in older adults.

Schippert said the most logical way to prevent transmission of these diseases is to take steps to prevent mosquitoes from breeding around the home. Schippert stated that mosquito larvae must live in still water for five or more days to complete their growth before changing into adult biting mosquitoes capable of transmitting disease. “Often the number of mosquitoes around the home can be greatly reduced by removing sources of standing water.” Also, use of insect repellents during evening hours when outdoors is a key method to prevent infection and illness from West Nile virus. Schippert offered these tips to homeowners provided by the Illinois Department of Public Health:

- Avoid being outdoors when mosquitoes are most active, especially between dusk and dawn. Use prevention methods whenever mosquitoes are present.
- When outdoors, wear shoes and socks, long pants and a long-sleeved shirt, and apply insect repellent that includes DEET, picaridin or oil of lemon eucalyptus according to label instructions. Consult a physician before using repellents on infants.
- Make sure doors and windows have tight fitting screens. Repair or replace screens that have tears or other openings. Try to keep doors and windows shut, especially at night.
- Eliminate all sources of standing water that can support mosquito breeding, including water in bird baths, ponds, flowerpots, wading pools, old tires and any other receptacles. In communities where there are organized mosquito control programs, contact your municipal government to report areas of stagnant water in roadside ditches, flooded yards and similar locations that may produce mosquitoes.
- Keep gutters free of leaves and debris.
- Cover trash containers to keep out rainwater.
- Repair leaky pipes and outside faucets.
- Empty children’s wading pools at least once per week and store indoors when not in use.

- Change the water in bird baths and plant pots or drip trays at least once per week.
- Store boats covered or upside down, or remove rainwater weekly.
- Keep grass cut short and shrubbery well-trimmed around the house so adult mosquitoes will not hide there.

Schippert indicated that so far this year, there have been ten positive human cases in Illinois, one of which was in Iroquois County. Fifty-six counties out of 102 have reported positive test results for West Nile Virus. Those reports include positive samples from humans, mosquitoes, horses, and birds. The West Nile virus in mosquitoes have been found in the surrounding counties of Champaign, Kankakee, and Livingston.

Schippert stated that the positive test results should remind people to take precaution to avoid contact with mosquitoes. Schippert said symptoms of encephalitis can range from mild to severe. Severe symptoms include rapid onset of severe headaches, high fever, and mental disturbances such as confusion, irritability, tremors, stupor and coma. Severe cases sometimes end in death or with survivors suffering permanent loss of limb function, reduction of intelligence and/or emotional instability. Anyone who thinks they may have contracted the disease should contact their medical provider for further evaluation. However, Schippert reminds the public that these cases are very rare and there is no need for the public to panic but just use common sense.

Illinois' surveillance for West Nile Virus began May 1 and includes laboratory tests on mosquitoes, dead crows, blue jays, robins and other perching birds, as well as the testing of sick horses and humans with West Nile-like disease symptoms. Citizens who observe a sick or dying perching bird should contact the local health department, which will determine if the bird is to be tested.

Additional information about West Nile virus can be found on the Illinois Department of Public Health's web site at www.idph.state.il.us/envhealth/wnv.htm or people can call the Iroquois County Public Health Department at 815-432-2483.
