

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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For additional information contact:

Michael Mullet, Community Relations Coordinator, (616) 336-2220

REDUCE EXPOSURE TO MOSQUITOES TO REDUCE RISK OF WEST NILE VIRUS

With the Memorial Day weekend approaching, the Kent County Health Department is reminding the community that individuals can reduce their risk of West Nile Virus (WNV) by reducing their exposure to mosquitoes. Specifically, health officials recommend using insect repellent when outdoors, and eliminating standing water in outdoor areas around homes – especially important with recent rains.

Although no human cases of the disease have yet been reported in Michigan, health officials say West Nile Virus is now considered endemic, and some level of infection in humans, birds, and mosquitoes can be expected every year. In 2002, there were nearly 600 human cases of WNV reported in Michigan (57 in Kent County), while in 2003 there were only 19 (none in Kent County). Because of such fluctuation, health officials say it is impossible to predict what the 2004 WNV season will bring.

In humans, West Nile Virus can produce a range of symptoms. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), most people infected with WNV will have no symptoms, though up to 20% may develop mild illness with symptoms including fever, headache, body aches, rash and swollen lymph glands. Approximately one in 150 people infected with WNV will develop severe illness which may be characterized by severe headache, high fever, stiff neck, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness, paralysis, and, rarely, death. Persons 50 and over have the highest risk of severe disease.

Because it is impossible to know how a person might react to the West Nile Virus, and whether or not any individual may become severely ill, the Health Department recommends reducing exposure to mosquitoes to reduce the potential risk of WNV infection and illness. Specifically:

- Use insect repellent containing DEET. Apply insect repellent to exposed skin and spray clothing with repellents since mosquitoes may bite through thin clothing. Insect repellents containing 10%-35% DEET are generally effective (higher concentrations work longer but are not more effective); use DEET concentrations 10% or less for children. Always read and follow manufacturers' label directions when applying insect repellent as most are not recommended for use on children under two years of age.
- Stay indoors at dawn, dusk, and in the early evening, when mosquitoes are active.
- Wear light-colored long-sleeved shirts and long pants whenever you are outdoors, but especially in wooded or wetland areas.

Kent County Health Department
Reduce Exposure to Mosquitoes to Reduce Risk of West Nile Virus

- Make sure window and door screens are maintained in good condition to keep mosquitoes out of buildings and homes.
- Drain standing water around yards, decks, and other outdoor areas around the home. Flower pots, pet bowls, clogged rain gutters, swimming pool covers, discarded tires, buckets – anything that can hold standing water – is a site in which mosquitoes can lay eggs. Change water in bird baths every three to four days (twice a week).
- Avoid activities in areas where large numbers of mosquitoes are present.

Report Dead Birds to Health Department

Dead bird surveillance is a known indicator of West Nile Virus activity, and dead bird densities can help predict the potential for human infections. For this reason, the Health Department is again asking Kent County residents to report any dead birds they might find. All dead bird reports are mapped to identify potential ‘hot spots’ of WNV activity. People can report a dead bird via the Health Department’s WNV web site at www.accesskent.com/westnile, or by calling the Health Department at (616) 632-7100. While it is not necessary to know the exact location of the bird, people will be asked to report the nearest cross streets. People can also report a dead bird directly to the state at www.michigan.gov/emergingdiseases by selecting the “West Nile Virus” link.

Educational Presentations Available

The Health Department is again offering educational presentations about West Nile Virus. In 2003, the Health Department provided over 60 presentations to a combined audience of over 1,500 people from schools, churches, employers, and neighborhood associations. The free presentations are available to groups of 10 or more throughout the summer by calling the Health Department at (616) 336-8797.

More Information

The Health Department’s West Nile Virus web site is an excellent resource for information about the disease. In addition to the Health Department’s 2004 West Nile Virus Action Plan, the site contains fact sheets, an online slideshow presentation, current Health Department WNV news releases, and links to other WNV sites. The address is www.accesskent.com/westnile.

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