

Conditions Becoming Favorable for West Nile Virus Health Officials Say

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The Kent County Health Department today issued a reminder to Kent County residents that West Nile Virus (WNV) season is here, and are encouraging residents to take steps to reduce their exposure to mosquitoes in order to reduce the potential risk of WNV infection.

Although no West Nile Virus-infected birds have been reported in Kent County, increasing numbers of dead bird reports coupled with the natural seasonal increase in *Culex* mosquito populations mean conditions are favorable for West Nile Virus activity.

Health officials say that while they waited for the identification of an infected bird as a positive indicator of WNV activity in the area last year, they now realize the risk of infection is on the rise before infected birds are found. "Since 1999, when West Nile Virus was first identified in the U.S., every state that has had cases one year has had cases the next year, and usually in greater numbers" said Health Department Administrative Health Officer Cathy Raevsky. "We know West Nile Virus is here. We saw it in Kent County last year, and we will see it here this year. Because of that we feel we have a responsibility to be proactive and alert the community now rather than wait until an infected bird is found."

The Health Department received 883 citizen reports of dead birds through June 13, 2003. Health officials say that increased community awareness of West Nile Virus, coupled with easier reporting through the Health Department web site (over half of dead bird reports have come via the web site), have likely contributed to the high number of bird reports. A map of locations where dead birds have been reported is on the Health Department's WNV web page and is updated weekly.

"What we are seeing right now may be indicative of 'pre-outbreak' conditions," said Raevsky. "Now is the time people need to start being vigilant about emptying standing water around their homes to reduce mosquito breeding areas, and to start considering the importance of insect repellent during their time outdoors."

In keeping with the Health Department's 2003 WNV Action Plan and Recommendations, education has been a significant focus of public health prevention activities. Health Department staff have provided 32 West Nile Virus educational presentations to a combined audience of over 800 people including churches, neighborhood associations, school groups, and employers with large numbers of outdoor workers. The free presentations will continue to be available throughout the summer by calling the Health Department at (616) 336-8797. The Health Department also distributed some 250,000 educational fliers directly to homes in Kent County,

and sponsored a special WNV workshop for clinicians and health care providers June 12. The Department's WNV web site continues to be updated and contains educational materials in English and Spanish, clinical and epidemiological information, and links to other WNV resources on the web. The web site address is www.accesskent.com/westnile.

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 over 50 and over have the highest risk of severe disease.

In Kent County in 2002, there were 57 reported cases of West Nile Virus, and four deaths. While the reported cases were mostly severe cases, health officials say extrapolating the 1-in-150 severe infections ratio suggests that over 8,000 Kent County residents could have been infected with WNV last year - most being asymptomatic, or with illness too mild to warrant significant medical intervention or diagnostic testing. All of the deaths occurred in persons over 50 years of age.

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.
- 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.

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