

West Nile Virus Detected in Bird from Kent County

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The Michigan Department of Community Health today confirmed that a dead crow found in Kent County has tested positive for West Nile Virus, the first specimen from Kent County to test positive for the virus. The detection was based on laboratory testing conducted by the Animal Health Diagnostic Laboratory at Michigan State University, and confirmed by the Michigan Department of Community Health. Ongoing public and animal surveillance for the virus has not detected any cases in horses or humans in Kent County, nor in all of Michigan.

Kent County Health officials say they were not surprised that an infected bird had been found, and had expected to see West Nile Virus in Kent County -- especially after infected birds were found this year in both Ottawa and Muskegon counties. West Nile Virus was first identified in Michigan at the end of August 2001. Last year, 65 birds from 10 counties were found to be infected with the virus. In 2002, according to the most recent figures from the Michigan Department of Agriculture, infected birds have been found in 13 counties.

West Nile Virus was first identified in the United States in 1999, in New York City, when a human outbreak was found to be related to infected mosquitoes. The virus is carried by birds, and mosquitoes become infected when they bite an infected bird. A mosquito infected with West Nile Virus can pass the virus to humans and other animals, including other birds, through biting. Crows and blue jays are known to be particularly susceptible to West Nile Virus and are used as indicators of West Nile Virus activity in a particular region.

In humans, West Nile Virus can produce a range of symptoms. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), most (human) infections are mild, with symptoms including fever, headache, and body aches, occasionally with skin rash and swollen lymph glands. More severe infection may be marked by headache, high fever, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness, paralysis, and, rarely, death. While persons 50 and over have the highest risk of severe disease, many people infected with West Nile Virus have no symptoms at all and may not even know they are infected. An infected person cannot transmit the virus to other people.

Health officials emphasize that the risk of becoming infected with West Nile virus is extremely low. According to the CDC, "even in areas where mosquitoes do carry the virus, very few mosquitoes-much less than 1%-are infected. If the mosquito is infected, less than 1% of people who get bitten and become infected will get severely ill. The chances (a person) will become severely ill from any one mosquito bite are extremely small."

Because the infected bird specimen from Kent County confirms the presence of West Nile Virus in the county, state health officials say no additional specimens from Kent County will be tested. The Kent County Health Department however has begun conducting dead crow and blue jay surveillance, and is asking people to call with reports of dead crows or blue jays (people are asked not to bring the birds to the Health Department). Environmental Health officials will map reports of dead birds and, if reports indicate a particularly high number of dead crows or blue jays in a particular area, evaluate the need for mosquito surveillance and/or eradication in that area. People finding a dead crow or blue jay are asked to call the Health Department at (616) 632-7100.

Dead crows, blue jays, or other birds can be disposed of by burying them, or placing them in a sealed plastic trash bag in the garbage. People should avoid touching any dead bird with their bare hands and instead use a shovel to remove the bird, and use work gloves or rubber gloves to cover their hands. People should also wash their hands after having any such contact, especially before eating.

Health officials say that because West Nile Virus is transmitted by mosquitoes, reducing personal exposure to mosquitoes is the most effective way of minimizing the potential risks of West Nile Virus infection. The Michigan Department of Community Health and CDC recommend the following:

Stay indoors at dawn, dusk, and in the early evening, when mosquitoes are active.

Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants whenever you are outdoors, but especially in wooded or wetland areas.

Use insect repellent. Spray clothing with repellents containing permethrin or DEET since mosquitoes may bite through thin clothing. Apply insect repellent sparingly to exposed skin. An effective repellent will contain 35% DEET. DEET in high concentrations (greater than 35%) provides no additional protection. Repellents may irritate the eyes and mouth, so avoid applying repellent to the hands of children. Whenever you use an insecticide or insect repellent, be sure to read and follow the manufacturer's Direction for Use, as printed on the product. Note: Vitamin B and "ultrasonic" devices are generally not effective in preventing mosquito bites.

Make sure window and door screens are maintained in good condition to keep mosquitoes out of buildings and homes.

Drain standing water in the yard. 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.

Avoid activities in areas where large numbers of mosquitoes are present.

Additional information on West Nile Virus can be found on the Kent County Health Department web site at www.acecesskent.com/Health.