



NEWS RELEASE

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Alabama public health laboratory to test for West Nile virus

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Alabama Department of Public Health will be working with the medical community in Alabama to more quickly identify West Nile virus. Effective Aug 26, the department's Bureau of Clinical Laboratories will begin to accept WNV testing samples of cerebral spinal fluid provided by physicians.

The department has informed physicians, infection control practitioners and laboratory directors in the state that this service will be made available at its Montgomery facility. Specimens are currently tested by commercial laboratories or by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The majority of persons infected with WNV do not suffer any symptoms, while approximately 20 percent have a mild, flu-like illness. About 1 in 150 infected individuals suffer serious symptoms.

The Alabama Department of Public Health announced the third human case of West Nile virus infection in Alabama in 2002 on Aug. 13.

To date, 210 birds, 25 pools of mosquitoes, and 5 horses have been reported from 36 of Alabama's 67 counties. These counts far exceed the level of virus activity reported in 2001, when 59 positive birds in 13 counties were detected, and none earlier than the end of August. In 2001 Alabama experienced two human cases of West Nile virus infection, one of which was fatal.

The Department of Public Health will increase its efforts to inform the public about the importance of personal protection measures individuals can take to reduce their risks of being bitten by infected mosquitoes. In addition, the department will distribute additional information to hospitals and clinics about this disease and the availability of tests for human cases.

WNV and other mosquito-borne viruses such as Eastern Equine Encephalitis are transmitted from bird to mosquito to bird. Occasionally, the same mosquitoes will take blood from mammals, including humans and horses. Mosquitoes pick up the virus by feeding on the blood of infected birds. The disease cannot be spread from person to person or from animals to people.

Since mosquitoes are commonly found throughout much of Alabama, health officials offer practical strategies for the mosquito season:

- Wear loose fitting, light colored clothes to help prevent mosquitoes from reaching the skin and to retain less heat, making yourself less "attractive" to mosquitoes. Mosquitoes are more attracted to dark colors.
- When possible, wear long sleeves and long pants.
- Avoid perfumes, colognes, fragrant hair sprays, lotions and soaps, which attract mosquitoes.

PERSONAL PROTECTION; REPELLENTS

- Follow the label instructions when applying repellents. Permethrin repellents are only for clothes - not for application on the skin.
- When using repellents avoid contact with eyes, lips and nasal membranes.
- Use concentrations of less than 10 percent when applying DEET-containing products on children.
- Apply DEET repellent on arms, legs, and other exposed areas, but never under clothing.
- After returning indoors, wash treated skin with soap and water.
- Citronella candles and repellents containing citronella can help, but their range is limited.
- Herbals such as cedar, geranium, pennyroyal, lavender, cinnamon, and garlic are not very effective.

PERSONAL PROTECTION; AROUND THE HOME

- Mosquito activity peaks at dusk and again at dawn; restrict outdoor activity during these hours.
- Keep windows and door screens in good condition.
- Replace porch lights with yellow light bulbs that will attract fewer insects.
- Mosquitoes breed in standing water; empty all water from old tires, cans, jars, buckets, drums, plastic wading pools, toys, and other containers.
- Clean clogged gutters.
- Remove the rim from potted plants and replace water in plant/flower vases weekly.
- Replenish pet watering dishes daily and rinse bird baths twice weekly.
- Fill tree holes and depressions left by fallen trees with dirt or sand.
- Stock ornamental ponds with mosquito fish or use larvicide "doughnuts."