

Alabama reports its first fatal case of West Nile virus in 2002

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The Alabama Department of Public Health announces two new cases of West Nile infection in humans, including the first fatal case of the infection in an Alabama resident this year. The fatal case occurred in an elderly Montgomery County woman. The only other death occurred last year in a Jefferson County resident.

West Nile infection has also been identified in a 71-year-old Chambers County man. West Nile infection has been identified in 21 Alabama residents to date in 2002.

"Regrettably, Alabama has now reported its first fatal case of West Nile infection this year. About four out of five individuals infected will never experience any symptoms of West Nile infection, with most others suffering headaches, fever, and flu-like illnesses," according to Dr. Charles Woernle, assistant state health officer for disease control and prevention.

"One in 150 will suffer more severe symptoms of encephalitis that can include severe headache, confusion, coma and death. Approximately 17 percent of patients that develop encephalitis will die as a result of the illness. Individuals are warned to continue taking precautions against being bitten by mosquitoes."

Thirty-four horses, 429 birds and 63 mosquito pools have been confirmed with West Nile virus. The virus has been detected in 59 of Alabama's 67 counties. The department continues to believe that the virus is likely present in every Alabama community.

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 continue 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 these practical strategies for the mosquito season:

PERSONAL PROTECTION; CLOTHING AND AROMATICS

- 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."

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