

First human case of West Nile virus infection diagnosed in Alabama

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Alabama Department of Public Health announces the first human case of West Nile virus infection diagnosed in an Alabama resident this year. The case occurred in a Geneva County man in his sixties who became ill the end of June and is now recovering at home.

"This first human case of West Nile virus infection in 2003 is, unfortunately, not unexpected, given the increasingly widespread level of West Nile virus activity. Furthermore, there is statewide evidence of Eastern Equine Encephalitis virus activity, making it all the more important that people take precautions to reduce their chances of being bitten by mosquitoes," said Dr. Donald E. Williamson, State Health Officer.

In addition to the human case in Geneva County, West Nile virus has so far been detected in captured mosquitoes in Marshall County; in a horse in Baldwin County; and in birds in Baldwin, Clay, Covington, Dallas, DeKalb, Jefferson, Macon, Marshall, Mobile, Shelby, Talladega, Walker and Winston counties. Eastern Equine Encephalitis virus has been detected in mosquitoes in Jackson County; in an emu in Butler County; in sentinel chickens in Baldwin County; and in horses in Baldwin, Chilton, Clarke, Covington, Dale, and Mobile counties.

Added Dr. Williamson, "Eastern Equine Encephalitis virus has been detected in Jackson County in a species of mosquito that often bites people. Eastern Equine Encephalitis disease in people can lead to a mortality rate as high as 30 percent, considerably higher than what is seen with West Nile encephalitis."

Both viruses in humans cause a spectrum of illness ranging from infection without any symptoms to encephalitis involving fever, headache, and possibly confusion, disorientation, stupor, tremors, convulsions, paralysis, coma and death.

In addition to human illness, these viruses also cause illness in livestock, particularly horses. "It is not too late for owners to protect their horses by vaccinating them against West Nile and Eastern Equine Encephalitis viruses," urged Ron Sparks, Commissioner of Agriculture and Industries. "These vaccines are the best way to protect horses against these harmful infections."

Horse infections from Eastern Equine Encephalitis can cause greater than 90 percent mortality rates in unvaccinated horses. In addition, about 1 out of 3 unvaccinated horses can die from West Nile virus infection. Two separate vaccines are required to protect horses from both viruses.

To lower their chances of being bitten by mosquitoes, persons should remember the 5 D's of Prevention: Dusk, Dawn, Dress, DEET and Drain. Avoid being outside during dawn and dusk when mosquitoes are most active. Dress to cover your skin with protective clothing. Protect bare skin with mosquito repellent that contains DEET, and drain empty containers holding stagnant water in which mosquitoes breed.

Avoiding mosquito bites and eliminating mosquito-breeding sites will help protect individuals and the community from West Nile virus and Eastern Equine Encephalitis and the other mosquito-borne viruses that occur in Alabama. These viruses are maintained by transmission between birds and mosquitoes. However, sometimes the viruses spread to humans and other animals by mosquitoes that feed on infected birds and then bite humans and other animals. People contribute to the continuing cycle of these viruses by maintaining environments (especially standing water) in which mosquitoes can lay eggs.

These mosquito-borne viruses are not spread person-to-person, horse-to-person, or horse-to-horse. A person or animal is usually infected through the bite of an infected mosquito. The key to protection is avoiding mosquito bites.

Very few mosquitoes are infectious. Most people who are infected do not get sick. In some individuals, these viruses can cause a serious illness called encephalitis, which is an inflammation of the brain. People with encephalitis are sick enough that they will seek medical care and be hospitalized. The seriousness of an illness may depend on a person's health and age. West Nile virus affects the elderly most severely and Eastern Equine Encephalitis affects the young and elderly most severely.

Information about West Nile virus can be found on the ADPH website at <http://www.adph.org/westnilevirus/>.

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