



NEWS RELEASE

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

RSA Tower 201 Monroe Street, Suite 914 Montgomery, AL 36104

Phone 334-206-5300 Fax 334-206-5534

www.adph.org

Alabama records first death from West Nile virus in 2003

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: John Mosely Hayes, Dr.P.H.
(334) 206-5971

The Alabama Department of Public Health announces the first death from West Nile virus infection in Alabama in 2003. The fatality occurred in a Talladega County woman in her eighties. She first became ill in July.

In addition, there have been four new human cases of West Nile virus infection in the state since the first human case in Geneva County last week. Three of the four individuals are recovering, and the fourth, a man in his eighties, is currently hospitalized. This brings the total reported human cases of West Nile virus infection in Alabama to six.

The four new human cases are from Baldwin, Marshall, Monroe and Shelby counties. Illnesses among these four new cases started either in June or July.

"This unfortunate death and the new human cases of West Nile virus should reinforce the need for Alabamians to take precautions to avoid mosquito bites," said Dr. Donald Williamson, state health officer. "Furthermore, there also has been 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.

"Every Alabamian should assume that mosquitoes infected with mosquito-borne virus are in their community. The risk of disease from mosquito bites will probably increase and continue until a freeze in late fall kills the mosquitoes."

In addition to the human cases, West Nile virus has so far been detected in captured mosquitoes in Marshall and Lee counties; in two horses, one each in Baldwin and Mobile counties; and in 29 birds distributed among Baldwin, Blount, 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 eight horses distributed among Baldwin, Chilton, Clarke, Covington, Dale and Mobile counties.

In 2002 Alabama experienced 49 human cases of West Nile virus infection, three of which were fatal. The last time a human case of Eastern Equine Encephalitis occurred was in 1996, in a man that died.

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. Eastern Equine Encephalitis in humans can have a mortality rate as high as 30 percent, considerably higher than that seen with West Nile encephalitis.

The Alabama 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.

To lower the risk 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 is most severe in both the young and the elderly.

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

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