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Public Health Officials Warn Against Complacency Toward West Nile Virus Threat

With the first discovery of West Nile Virus in a local mosquito sample this week, public health officials are warning residents not to become complacent about protecting themselves even though no human cases have been reported in Illinois so far this year.

"The fact that to date only one local test batch of mosquitoes has been found to carry the virus, or that no human cases have been reported so far, does not mean the threat is not here," said Environmental Services Supervisor Mike Charley, whose staff oversees activities related to West Nile Virus as part of the Oak Park Department of Public Health.

"The state health department has identified an increase in positive mosquitoes recently. The Culex mosquito that carries the virus loves hot weather and we may start to see increasing numbers of positive samples in Oak Park as well. We are coming upon the peak time for the mosquitoes that carry the virus."

The best protection against the virus, Charley said, is to keep the mosquito population as low as possible and protect oneself from being bitten. Steps he recommended include the following:

- Eliminate places that might collect water where mosquitoes can lay eggs, such as weeds, tall grass and discarded tires. Even depressions in the ground or a discarded bottle cap can be a potential mosquito-breeding site.
- Regularly empty and clean containers such as birdbaths, wading pools and ceramic garden pots.
- Keep gutters clean. Clogged roof gutters can easily hold enough water to be a major mosquito larvae reservoir.
- Check window air conditioners, dryer vents, window screens or any other penetration points in a home's exterior to ensure adult mosquitoes can't get inside.
- Avoid the outdoors at dusk or dawn when mosquitoes are most active. Or wear shoes, socks, long pants and a long-sleeved shirt when outdoors at these times.

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- Use mosquito repellents, being sure to follow manufacturer's directions. Repellents containing DEET (N, N-diethyl-m toluamide) and Picaridin (KBR 3023) are considered the most effective.

Meanwhile, the Des Plaines Valley Mosquito Abatement District is continuing to treat all street catch basins with larvicide every seven to 10 days during the mosquito breeding season. The abatement district also will treat catch basins on private property on request, provide information on acquiring mosquito-larvae-eating *gambusia* fish for ornamental ponds and pick up old vehicle tires. Visit www.desplainsvalleymad.com or call 447.1765 for more information.

West Nile virus first surfaced in the United States in the New York metropolitan area in the fall of 1999. The virus quickly spread across the country, reaching Illinois two years later. By the end of 2002, Illinois led the nation in confirmed cases with more than 800 human infections and 63 deaths. Human cases have since dramatically decreased, as the virus appeared to spread further west.

The chance of being infected with the West Nile Virus actually is very small, officials. Less than 1 percent of mosquitoes are infected, and less than 1 percent of the people who are bitten by an infected mosquito will become severely ill. However, the experiences of the past few years have shown that a wide range of individuals may be susceptible, especially persons 50 years old or older, and those with compromised immune systems.

For more information on West Nile Virus, including prevention tips, contact the Oak Park Department of Public Health at 708.358.5694, email health@oak-park.us or visit www.oak-park.us. Information also is posted on several websites, including the Illinois Department of Public Health www.idph.state.il.us and Centers for Disease Control www.cdc.gov.

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