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### Health Department on the Alert for West Nile Virus

Recent discoveries of dead crows in Cook County that tested positive for the West Nile Virus have public health officials urging residents to keep the mosquito population down by eliminating breeding places, wearing repellent and covering exposed skin when outdoors at dawn, dusk and early evening.

“For most people, mosquitoes are merely nuisances,” said Georgeen Polyak, PhD, director of the Oak Park Department of Public Health. “Occasionally, however, some mosquitoes can transmit viruses to humans that may cause serious illness. The best defense against mosquito-borne viruses is prevention, and the best preventions are to reduce the mosquito population and keep them from biting you.”

West Nile Virus has gotten considerable public attention even though the risk of contracting the disease is extremely low and no human cases have been reported in Illinois. Since the first case of West Nile virus in the United States was confirmed in New York in 1999, some 149 cases of have been confirmed, including 18 deaths.

“Fortunately, only a small percentage of mosquitoes carry viruses, and only a small percentage of the population is ever infected,” Dr. Polyak explained. “Estimates are that less than 1 percent of mosquitoes carry the West Nile encephalitis virus, and fewer than 1 percent of people bitten by an infected mosquito become seriously ill.”

Polyak said the elderly tend to be the most susceptible to the virus, which, in extreme cases, interferes with the central nervous system and causes inflammation of the brain.

Eliminating places for mosquitoes to breed and live can significantly reduce any risk of infection, according to public health officials. Since mosquitoes lay their eggs in stagnant water, standing water such as in clogged gutters, wading pools not in use and any containers that might collect water should be eliminated.

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Covering exposed skin with shoes and socks, long pants and long-sleeved shirts at dawn, dusk and early evening hours when mosquitoes are most active also can reduce bites. In addition, mosquito repellent can be an effective deterrent to hungry mosquitoes. Officials say caution should be exercised when using repellants that contain DEET, an effective, but potentially toxic ingredient if not used according to manufacturer's directions.

For more tips on reducing mosquito populations and keeping them from biting, contact the Department of Public Health at 358.5490.

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