

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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SPRING MAY BRING WEST NILE VIRUS TO TEXAS

DALLAS – May 7, 2002 – With spring rain and warm weather come mosquitoes. But this year, local public health officials are worried the mosquitoes will bring something new with them – West Nile virus.

West Nile virus, which has been spreading westward across the United States since 1999, could make its first appearance in Texas this summer, according to Dr. Elizabeth Race, assistant professor of internal medicine at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. Residents should take steps to be prepared, she said. “It’s only a matter of time until West Nile virus gets to Texas.”

The virus, which is spread to humans by mosquitoes, causes no appreciable illness in most people. A minority of people will develop a mild-to-moderate flu-like illness. Symptoms include fever, headache and body aches. In a few people, especially the elderly, the virus can attack the nervous system, causing muscle weakness and swelling of the brain, and possibly leading to paralysis or death. Fatalities are rare, though.

West Nile virus, which is related to St. Louis encephalitis and dengue fever, was discovered in 1937 in the West Nile district of Uganda. In recent years, epidemics of West Nile virus were reported in Algeria in 1994, Romania in 1996, the Czech Republic in 1997, the Congo in 1998 and Russia in 1999.

The United States outbreak began in New York City in 1999 and has since spread north to Canada, south to Florida and west to Little Rock, Ark. and New Orleans, La. At least 10 people have died in the outbreak.

“The majority of people bitten by a mosquito will not get sick,” Race said. “In fact, many healthy people have been infected with West Nile virus and never know. But for the elderly, this virus may pose a serious threat.”

The disease’s spread has followed the migratory pattern of birds, as mosquitoes can

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transmit the virus to birds as well as humans. The first indication that West Nile virus is in Texas may be dead crows or blue jays, Race said.

“Crows and blue jays are more susceptible to the disease than other birds,” Race said. “By one estimate, two-thirds of New York’s crow population may have died during the first outbreak in 1999.”

Dead birds pose no health risk, however, since the disease is transmitted only through a mosquito’s bite. It cannot be spread from person to person or from birds to people. Nevertheless, Race suggests calling local health officials if you see a dead crow or blue jay so it can be tested for the virus.

The disease can also infect horses, though a vaccine is available for these animals. Vaccines are being developed for humans but are not available yet.

To guard against infection, Race suggests:

- Wearing long pants and long-sleeved shirts;
- Using insect repellent when outdoors this summer;
- Avoiding being outside at dawn or dusk when mosquitoes are most active; and
- Eliminating mosquito-breeding sites, such as standing pools of water.

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