

Virus battle covers state

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Health officials stress vigilance, but not alarm or panic, about the West Nile virus making its way across Oklahoma.

The disease is spread by mosquitoes who feed on infected birds, then bite other birds, animals or people. The virus made its first appearance in the United States in New York City during the summer of 1999.

At the end of 2001, West Nile virus had been confirmed in 28 eastern states, including Arkansas and Louisiana, so the Oklahoma Department of Health developed a surveillance program for West Nile virus called "On Watch." The first case of West Nile in Oklahoma was identified July 17 in the northeastern part of the state.

According to figures released by the Department of Health, as of Thursday, there were 22 birds that tested positive for West Nile in nine counties, including one in Payne County.

There have been no human cases reported in Oklahoma, thus far, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta estimates that fewer than 1 percent of mosquitoes actually carry the virus.

CDC also estimates that of those bitten by infected mosquitoes, less than 1 percent will become severely ill -- a figure considered to be less than 1 in 2 million.

To help track the spread of the virus, Oklahoma residents are asked to report any dead birds they find, especially crows, blue jays, hawks and owls, which are more likely to carry the disease.

Anyone finding a dead bird should call (800) 990-CROW (2769), Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Callers will be asked to give a description of the bird and report where the bird was found. If the bird is suitable for testing, callers will be asked to take the bird to a local health department.

According to a spokeswoman at the 800 number, local residents are asked to take it to the health department. If the bird is found after business hours, steps should be taken to preserve the bird and keep it as cool as possible for testing.

First, it is recommended to avoid bare-hand contact when handling dead birds, even though West Nile virus has not been known to spread by touching dead birds. Use gloves or a plastic bag to cover hands to pick up the dead bird.

Each bird should be placed in a Ziploc or tied plastic bag and then placed inside a second sealed bag. The bird should then be refrigerated in an ice chest or refrigerator not used for food until it can be dropped off.

Although not all dead birds will be tested, Oklahoma public health officials would like residents to report all dead birds.

"There is a list of birds that they are NOT testing," said Janice Montgomery with the

Department of Agriculture, who is helping man the dead bird hotline.

“This list includes baby birds of any kind, doves, pigeons, sparrows, starlings, egrets, chickens, guineas or any domestic fowl.

“Because they aren’t testing certain birds, when someone calls in and doesn’t know what kind of bird it is, they need to at least give us a color and size. We want to make bird collection as easy as possible on everyone. Also, the birds should only have been dead for 48 hours or less.”

Prevention is the best course of action, so residents should avoid contact with mosquitoes and eliminate areas around their homes that could become potential breeding grounds.

To avoid mosquitoes, limit outdoor activity during peak mosquito feeding times, usually early morning and dusk.

When outdoors, long-sleeved shirts and long pants should be worn and insect repellents containing DEET should be used. It may also be helpful to wear light-colored clothing and limit the use of perfumes and fragranced lotions and shampoos that attract mosquitoes.

To help eliminate mosquito breeding grounds, residents should eliminate standing water on their property. Remove old tires, empty flower pots, buckets, broken toys or other containers that could hold water. They should rinse, scrub and refill bird baths weekly; regularly maintain swimming pools and hot tubs; empty plastic and inflatable pools once a week; empty their pet’s outdoor water dish and refill daily; store boats covered or upside down; clean debris from roof gutters; and trim grass and weeds.

For information about mosquitoes, contact Oklahoma County OSU Extension Services at (405) 713-1125.

For updates on West Nile virus activity and state surveillance results visit <http://www.health.state.ok.us/program/cdd/ow/index.html>

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