

WEST NILE VIRUS

Fighting the West Nile Virus

by Michael Loomis

A war rages along our Atlantic Seaboard and the Gulf Coast. Thousands of birds have already died in this war, and millions of dollars have been spent to combat the foe. The enemy: the West Nile virus, a deadly disease never before encountered by the birds in North America. With your help, this epidemic may be slowed, halted, and possibly reversed.

The West Nile virus has been known in the Old World since 1937, but only recently has it been detected in North America. The virus is primarily a disease of wild birds; it is spread from bird to bird and from bird to mammal by the bite of a female mosquito. Besides killing birds, the virus can cause deadly brain diseases in humans and horses.

That said, please don't panic. The odds of humans contracting the West Nile virus are extremely low, and birds themselves pose no threat to humans. The virus cannot be transmitted directly from birds to people or from people to people. You cannot get the virus from touching a live or dead infected bird. Infected mosquitoes (which only bite LIVE birds) are the principal transmitters of the virus.

Here are more reassuring facts: Even in areas where the virus has been detected, less than 1% of mosquitoes are carriers. And even if bitten by an infected mosquito, less than 1% of humans would become ill. Of the tiny amount of the human population that becomes ill, most exhibit only mild flu-like symptoms. Even among the elderly, who are the ones most at risk, the chances of severe infection are low.

How did this insidious virus reach our shores? No one knows. An infected bird may have been smuggled into the U.S. from Africa or Asia. Or virus-infected mosquitoes may have hitched a ride on a plane or in the hold of a ship. The good news is, with the exception of American Crows and other corvids, there are only a few individual birds from 18 species that have hosted the virus.

Crows and jays appear to be highly sensitive to the virus. As many as 10,000 crows died of the disease in metropolitan New York in 1999. Some people have blamed crows for spreading the disease, but scientists think that is unlikely. Crows are victims, not the bad guys. But like the canary in the mineshaft, crows can alert us to the presence of the virus in time to limit the damage done by infected mosquitoes.

Ways to Stop Mosquitoes

Without mosquitoes, the West Nile virus cannot be transmitted to anything. Here are some environmentally friendly ways to get rid of adult mosquitoes and help stop larvae from breeding:

* Empty stagnant water from flowerpots, baskets, and other containers, so mosquitoes have no place to lay their eggs.

* Treat swimming pools with appropriate chemicals and drain water from pool covers.

* Install bat houses on your property. A single bat can devour more than 7,000 mosquitoes a night!

* Make sure roof gutters drain properly. Clean clogged gutters in the spring and fall to prevent the building up standing water.

* Change the water in birdbaths at least once a week. Install a fountain, waterfall rock, to create moving water, which inhibits larvae development.

* Use Mosquito Free Water Tension Eliminator on birdbaths without dripper to prevent mosquitoes from laying eggs.

* Remove or cut back weeds, tall grass, and bushes around your home -- they provide a home for adult mosquitoes.

If you want to protect yourself from biting mosquitoes, you can limit your outdoor activities during the time that mosquitoes are most active: dawn, dusk, and at night during the months of April through October. Wear protective clothing and consider using an insect repellent that contains 10% or less DEET (N, N-diethyl-methyl-meta-tolu-amide) for children and no more than 30% DEED for adults. (Use DEED according to the manufacturer's directions.)

Source: www.wcsv.org