



Department of Health
Agency of Human Services



Vermont begins 11th year of testing dead birds for West Nile virus

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BURLINGTON - Each year in Vermont, mosquitoes infected with West Nile virus feed on birds, and some birds become sick and can die. For the past 10 years, the Vermont Department of Health has conducted a statewide **“Dead Bird Surveillance Program.”** Tracking the number and location of bird deaths, along with testing some birds for West Nile virus, helps to assess the risk for human infection from mosquito bites, and directs prevention efforts.

Again this year, report sightings of dead birds by calling the central dead bird reporting line at the Vermont Department of Health at 1-800-913-1139. Some of the birds will be tested for West Nile virus. The dead bird reporting line will remain active until the middle of October, when the mosquitoes begin to die off and the risk of disease transmission declines.

The West Nile virus season peaks in late summer and runs through October. The risk for infection with West Nile virus continues into late fall, or as long as mosquitoes remain active.

“Although human cases of West Nile virus infection are still rare in Vermont, we want everyone to be aware of the Health Department surveillance programs and to take precautions to avoid mosquito bites,” said Erica Berl, an infectious disease epidemiologist with the Health Department, “For example, to reduce mosquitoes around your house, eliminate standing water where they might breed and drain areas where water can pool, such as rain gutters and wading pools.”

Although Vermont’s last reported human case of West Nile virus occurred in 2003, four positive birds were identified in 2009. Mosquitoes also tested positive last year, so the virus is still circulating in our state. In addition, the Health Department and the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets are on the lookout for another mosquito-borne virus, Eastern Equine Encephalitis virus. This virus has not been detected in Vermont but has been found in neighboring states and Quebec.

Only one out of five people who are infected with the West Nile virus experience symptoms. The symptoms are most often mild and include fever, body aches, headache, nausea, vomiting and sometimes swollen lymph nodes or a rash. Fewer than 1 percent of people develop severe illness affecting the central nervous system. The severe symptoms can include high fever, headache, neck stiffness, disorientation, muscle weakness, numbness and paralysis.

The Department of Health is urging Vermonters to:

- Wear long sleeves and pants and avoid outdoor activities at dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are active.
- Reduce mosquito breeding habitats by getting rid of standing water; drain areas where water can pool such as rain gutters, wading pools and any other water-holding containers such as old tires.
- Use effective mosquito repellents.
- Install or repair screens on windows and doors to keep mosquitoes out.
- Horses are also susceptible to infection and should be vaccinated against the virus.

For more information on West Nile Virus visit healthvermont.gov.

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