

DSHS Urges Precautions to Reduce West Nile Exposure

News Release

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The Texas Department of State Health Services is urging people to take precautions to reduce the risk of contracting West Nile virus, a mosquito borne illness. People should use insect repellent when outdoors and avoid going outside at dusk and dawn.

There has been a higher than usual number of human West Nile cases in Texas this year due to the warm winter and recent rains, particularly in the North Texas region. Statewide there have been 111 human West Nile virus cases and one death reported to DSHS this year. Of those, 71 were West Nile neuroinvasive disease cases, and 40 were West Nile fever cases. Approximately 80 percent of the cases reside in Dallas, Collin, Tarrant and Denton counties.

Over the past 10 years, 49 cases on average were reported to DSHS by this time each year, ranging from a low of 3 cases in 2011 to a high of 171 cases in 2006.

Humans can contract West Nile virus from a mosquito bite. Infected mosquitoes get the virus from feeding on infected birds and mammals. The virus can cause serious illness or death. West Nile neuroinvasive disease symptoms include stiff neck, visual problems, body tremors, mental confusion, memory loss and seizures. The milder form of the illness is West Nile fever. Symptoms include fever, headache, muscle and bone aches, nausea and drowsiness.

People with the milder form of illness typically recover on their own, although symptoms may last for several weeks. Up to 80 percent of people infected with West Nile virus will have no symptoms and will recover on their own.

The intensity of West Nile virus activity in Texas fluctuates from year to year and depends on a variety of factors including the weather, the numbers of birds and mosquitoes that maintain and spread the virus and human behavior. The season can last up until the first hard freeze of the year.

There are no medications to treat or vaccines to prevent West Nile virus infection. People over 50 years old and those with compromised immune systems are at a higher risk of becoming seriously ill when they become infected with the virus. If people have symptoms that cause them concern, they should contact their healthcare provider.

To reduce exposure to West Nile virus:

Use an approved insect repellent every time you go outside and follow the instructions on the label. Approved repellents are those that contain DEET, picaridin or oil of lemon eucalyptus.

Regularly drain standing water, including water collects in empty cans, tires, buckets, clogged rain gutters and saucers under potted plants. Mosquitoes breed in stagnant water.

Wear long sleeves and pants at dawn and dusk when mosquitoes are most active.
Use air conditioning or make sure there are screens on all doors and windows to keep mosquitoes from entering the home.

For more information on West Nile statistics, visit
www.dshs.state.tx.us/idcu/disease/arboviral/westNile/.

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Note: Local health departments report human cases of West Nile virus to DSHS and may have more up-to-date numbers on new cases in their areas.

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