



State of Idaho
Department of Health and Welfare
Department of Agriculture
Department of Fish and Game
District Health Departments

Dirk Kempthorne, Governor

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 19, 2005

Idaho Communities Can Begin Now to ‘Fight the Bite’ of West Nile Virus

West Nile virus was discovered in 11 of Idaho’s 44 counties in 2004, affecting three people along with numerous horses and birds. This year, the mosquito-borne virus is expected to spread throughout the state, which may have a more serious impact on Idaho communities.

“Idaho was one of the last states to detect West Nile virus, which gave us the opportunity to learn about the effects of West Nile from other affected states,” says Dr. Leslie Tengelsen, Deputy State Epidemiologist for the Department of Health and Welfare. “In almost all other states, West Nile activity increased dramatically during the second year, and 2005 would be considered Idaho’s second year. People should take action now to fight the bite of mosquitoes and protect their families and horses.”

West Nile virus is spread through the bite of an infected mosquito; it is not generally spread from person-to-person or from infected animals to people. The virus was first discovered in the United States in New York in 1999 and has spread steadily across the country. Last year, West Nile infection was detected nationwide in 2,470 people, resulting in 88 deaths.

“About 80 percent of people who are bitten by an infected mosquito will not become sick, but others may experience a mild, flu-like illness that can include headaches, body aches and a mild fever,” Tengelsen says. “Although rare, the virus can lead to serious illness, especially in people over the age of 50.”

To protect themselves, people are advised to:

- Insect-proof their homes by repairing or replacing screens;
- Reduce standing water on their property that provides mosquito breeding habitat, such as bird baths and decorative ponds;
- Cover up exposed skin when outdoors;
- Apply insect repellent approved by the EPA to exposed skin and clothing. Follow instructions on the product label, especially for children;
- Avoid mosquitoes when they are most active at dawn and dusk; and
- Report dead birds to your local Fish and Game office.

West Nile virus does not appear to affect most animals including dogs and cats, but can cause severe illness in horses and certain species of birds. Although there is not a vaccine available for people, there are several vaccines available for horses. Since the introduction of equine vaccines, the number of horses reported with West Nile infections has decreased dramatically, from 15,000 horses in 2002 to 1,341 last year.

(more)

“Almost one-third of all horses infected with West Nile will die from the infection if they have not been vaccinated,” says Dr. Marilyn Simunich, a veterinarian for the Idaho State Department of Agriculture. “People can protect their animals by contacting their veterinarian and arranging for a vaccination or booster shot for the 2005 mosquito season.”

The most common sign of West Nile Virus in horses is weakness, usually in the hindquarters. Weakness may be indicated by a widened stance, stumbling, leaning to one side and toe dragging. In extreme cases, paralysis may follow. Fever is sometimes evident, as are depression and fearfulness. Lip smacking, chewing movements and fine muscle tremors may be noticed. Horse owners who suspect West Nile viral infection of their animal should contact their veterinarian immediately.

Like horses, certain birds also are adversely affected by West Nile virus. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game will be testing and documenting dead birds this season. “Magpies, crows, raptors, ravens and jays frequently die from West Nile infections,” says Dr. Mark Drew, Idaho Fish and Game veterinarian. “We want to monitor our bird populations to determine the effects West Nile is having on wildlife in Idaho.”

Drew advises people who find dead birds to call their local Fish and Game office. “We will record all dead birds and test magpies, crows, raptors, ravens and jays that are appropriate for testing,” Dr. Drew says. “Generally, we are most interested in testing birds that have been dead for less than 48-hours.”

Testing dead birds will help track the spread of West Nile virus in Idaho. The Idaho District Health Departments will contribute in surveillance activities by setting up mosquito traps and collecting mosquitoes that will be tested weekly at the state public health lab. Along with surveillance, district health departments also will be working with healthcare providers to investigate possible human West Nile infections in Idaho communities.

Some areas of the state have mosquito abatement districts to control mosquito populations. Abatement districts are the responsibility of communities, counties or cities. These entities must make the decision to create and fund an abatement district. People interested in forming an abatement district should contact their county commissioners for additional information.

With warmer May weather, people are spending more time outdoors doing yard work or taking part in outdoor recreation opportunities. Tengelsen advises people to take precautions now. “West Nile virus is now part of our ecosystem and we can all do our part to reduce mosquito breeding habitat around our homes by reducing standing water,” she says. “By doing that and taking personal protective measures, we can fight the bite and enjoy the great Idaho outdoors.”

###

Media contact information about West Nile virus:

- For health and prevention strategies:
 - Tom Shanahan, Dept. of Health and Welfare, 334-0668
<http://www.healthandwelfare.idaho.gov>
 - Your District Health Department, <http://www.idahocareline.org/HealthDistricts.htm>
- For equine, agricultural or mosquito abatement questions, Wayne Hoffman, Dept. of Agriculture, 332-8671. <http://www.agri.state.id.us>
- For information about wild birds or dead bird reporting, Dr. Mark Drew, Dept. of Fish and Game, 454-7646. <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/>