

For Immediate Release

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Fight the Bite!

Mosquito season is upon us again, health officials remind us. These pesky insects, out in force across the state, can be carriers of West Nile virus, a potentially serious illness. South Heartland District Health Department executive director, Dr. Michele Bever, says that mosquitoes become infected by biting (feeding on) an infected bird. An infected mosquito can then spread the virus to animals it bites, such as other birds and horses, as well as humans. She said the usual carriers of West Nile virus are mosquitoes of the *Culex* species.

The most abundant mosquito collected across the state over the past two weeks was the *Culex tarsalis* mosquito, accounting for nearly half of mosquitoes trapped. As of August 3rd, mosquitoes collected in nine of 28 counties across the state have tested positive for West Nile virus. “We know that West Nile is endemic - meaning it is usual or common here - in the mosquitoes in Nebraska,” Bever said. “So residents should continue preventing mosquito bites and try to reduce areas around their homes where mosquitoes can breed.”

Becoming infected with West Nile virus can be life-changing event. “About 1 in every 150 people infected with West Nile virus will develop symptoms of severe illness that can last several weeks and may cause permanent neurological deficits,” Bever said. The symptoms of severe illness can include high fever, headache, neck stiffness, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness, numbness and paralysis. More severe cases of West Nile illness may require hospitalization to receive supportive treatment.

Approximately 20% of people infected with West Nile virus experience milder symptoms consisting of fever, headache, body aches, nausea, vomiting, and sometimes swollen lymph glands or a skin rash on the chest, stomach, and back. These symptoms can last from just a few days to several weeks.

Most people (4 out of 5) who are infected with West Nile virus do not show any symptoms at all, but there is no way to know ahead of time whether you will be one of these lucky ones. Most people with mild symptoms recover on their own. However, for others, the symptoms may last for weeks or months.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests several ways to prevent mosquito bites:

- When you are outdoors, be sure to wear mosquito repellent containing DEET, or other insect repellent that is registered with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and follow the directions on the package for proper use.
- Wear long pants and sleeves or stay indoors.
- Ensure your home is mosquito proof by checking to see that screens on your windows and doors are in good shape.
- Avoid areas of standing water and be aware of areas where mosquitoes are abundant.

Warner encourages residents to “Fight the Bite” to prevent illnesses carried by mosquitoes. “There are no vaccines for many mosquito-borne illnesses including West Nile virus,” said Jessica Warner, disease surveillance coordinator for the South Heartland District Health Department. “You can reduce the risk of infection by reducing the number of mosquitoes and mosquito breeding areas where you live, work, and recreate.”

Warner recommends emptying standing water from anything that might serve as a container: flower pots, gutters, tires, buckets, etc. In addition, drill a drainage hole in tire swings and frequently (at least weekly) empty and replace the water in outdoor pet bowls, children’s wading pools, or bird baths.

For more information call South Heartland District Health Department at 402-462-6211 or toll free at 1-877-238-7595 or visit the SHDHD website: www.southheartlandhealth.org

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