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Part 3 of 15

Next Topic: Outdoor Recreation Safety

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Playing the Odds with West Nile Virus

A gamble you don't want to take

Yakima, WA –The fact that West Nile virus (WNV) is well established in Yakima County isn't news. In recent years, Yakima County has led Washington State in the total number of birds, horses, and mosquito pools positive for WNV. Last year, more people tested positive for WNV in Yakima County than the cumulative statewide total to date. Because the virus is expected to remain in the local environment, routine surveillance of birds and mosquitoes is no longer performed by the Yakima Health District. There's an easier way to know when you're at risk for WNV in Yakima County. If mosquitoes are active, you're at risk – plain and simple. And the only way to prevent WNV is to prevent mosquito bites.

For the majority of people, WNV won't be an issue. Only one in five people (20%) bitten by an infected mosquito will develop any type of illness. Most may get a self-limiting illness of fever, headache, and body aches. Only 1 in 150 of those who get sick will develop severe neurological, potentially life-threatening illness. **The problem is that, until you are ill, there is no way to foretell whether you'll be among those who get no symptoms, self-limiting febrile illness, severe neurological illness, or even die from WNV.** By then, it's too late. There is no treatment for West Nile virus besides supportive therapy.

“By not taking the simple measures to prevent West Nile virus, you are effectively betting you'll be among the 80% who won't get sick,” warns Laura Charters, Environmental Health Specialist with the Yakima Health District. “The problem is that with West Nile virus, the bet is your life... and, unfortunately, all bets are final.”

In 2009, there were 21 confirmed human cases of West Nile virus in Yakima County alone – the highest number of cases ever in the county. Seventeen of the 21 cases were hospitalized due to the severity of their illness. Some still have not fully recovered, almost a year later. Others stories are much more tragic. A woman from Sunnyside died in September of 2009 after contracting WNV. Hers was the first death confirmed to be caused by WNV in the state of Washington.

Making matters worse, Yakima County's relatively mild winter may make the mosquitoes even more abundant this year than last. It is important that residents protect against mosquitoes in order to prevent additional illnesses in our community. Steps individuals can take to avoid mosquito bites are:

1. **Eliminate standing water that mosquitoes breed in.** Anything that can hold water can become a mosquito breeding ground in less than a week. Change water in pet bowls, animal troughs and bird baths at least once weekly. Fix leaky faucets that can create puddles and empty saucers for potted plants regularly.
2. **Avoid being bitten by mosquitoes altogether.** Screen windows and doors that remain open for ventilation. When possible, avoid being outside at dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are most active. If you must be out, cover your skin by wearing long pants, long-sleeved shirts, socks, and shoes. Mosquito repellents containing DEET, Picaridin, oil of lemon eucalyptus, or IR3535 are safe and effective against mosquitoes when used according to label instructions.

"There's no doubt that preventative measures are not necessarily convenient," notes Charters. "However, they are not only necessary, but essential if people are serious about protecting themselves and their families from WNV."

Mosquitoes can travel up to 20 miles. Even if residents are within a mosquito control district that is spraying for the pests, they may still have mosquitoes around their home or office. All county residents should take the necessary precautions to protect themselves from mosquitoes.

WNV illness typically occurs 3-14 days after being infected by the bite of a mosquito carrying the virus. Mild illness usually resolves without medical help. Symptoms include fever, headache, body aches, rash, and swollen lymph nodes. A more serious form of WNV disease affects less than one percent of symptomatic cases, producing symptoms such as neck stiffness, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness, paralysis, or even death. Individuals over 50 years of age appear to be more susceptible to developing this more serious form of WNV. People experiencing any of the above symptoms should consult their medical provider at once.

For more information on West Nile virus, visit <http://yakimahealthdistrict.org/commhealth/vwnv.htm>. To read about additional topics in the YHD's *Spring & Summer Safety Series*, visit www.yakimapublichealth.org.