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State Confirms Six New Cases of West Nile Virus

SANTA FE -- The New Mexico Department of Health announced today that six more individuals have tested positive for West Nile Virus infection. This brings the state's total to nine human cases of West Nile Virus so far this year. Previous cases were in Bernalillo, Valencia, and Luna counties.

The new cases are an adult woman from Bernalillo County, an adult man and an adult woman from Sandoval County, and an adult woman from Doña Ana County, all with the severe form of West Nile neuroinvasive disease. An adult man from Socorro County and an adult woman from Valencia County have the less severe form of West Nile.

Two adult men from Doña Ana County also tested positive for West Nile Virus when they donated blood. Because they had no symptoms of West Nile, they are not counted as confirmed cases. Blood banks routinely test blood donors for West Nile to be sure the disease is not introduced into the blood supply.

In addition to these human cases, birds have tested positive for West Nile Virus in Santa Fe and Doña Ana counties. Horses have tested positive in Doña Ana, Catron, Socorro, and Chaves counties, and mosquitoes have tested positive in Doña Ana, San Juan, Colfax, and Otero counties. Mosquitoes in Doña Ana and Sierra counties have also tested positive for Western Equine Encephalitis, which can cause disease similar to West Nile Virus.

“We see the most human cases of West Nile Virus during August and September,” said Paul Ettestad, the state public health veterinarian at the New Mexico Department of Health. “People need to be especially careful to avoid mosquito bites during these months.”

West Nile Virus can cause flu-like symptoms, such as fever, nausea, headache, and muscle aches. If someone feels they have the flu and are feeling sick, they should see their health-care provider. People older than 50 are at most risk for serious disease from West Nile Virus.

Both meningitis and encephalitis can be fatal, especially in the elderly. However, most people who become infected have either no symptoms or mild symptoms. Less than 1 percent of all people infected, including those who have no symptoms and have not been tested, develop meningitis or encephalitis. Meningitis is an infection of the lining around the brain, while encephalitis is an infection of the brain itself.

The Department of Health continues to recommend that people take the following steps to reduce the risk of West Nile infection:

- Stay indoors at dawn, dusk and in the early evening.
- Wear long-sleeved shirts, long pants and socks whenever you are outdoors.
- Products containing DEET or Picaridin can provide longer lasting protection. Use insect repellent products with no more than 35 percent DEET for adults and follow the directions on the label for children from ages 2-12. Natural products containing soybean oil or lemon eucalyptus oil have also been shown to be effective but need to be applied more often.
- Keep windows and doors closed if not screened. If you leave your house doors or windows open, make sure they have screens that fit tightly and have no holes.
- Do not allow water to stagnate in old tires, flowerpots, trash containers, swimming pools, birdbaths, pet bowls, etc.
- Horse owners should contact their veterinarian to have their horses vaccinated against West Nile Virus.

In addition, insect repellents should never be used on pets, according to the National Animal Poison Control Center, which is part of the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine. Dogs and cats tend to lick themselves and can ingest toxins, which could harm them significantly more than the West Nile Virus. So far both species have been fairly resistant to the virus.

Nationally, there have been 501 cases of West Nile Virus with 12 fatalities reported in the United States so far this year. In 2004, New Mexico had 88 lab-confirmed cases with four fatalities. In 2003, New Mexico had 209 lab-confirmed cases with four fatalities.