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Health Department Reminds Residents to Be Aware of West Nile Virus Threat, Take Precautions

BATON ROUGE -- Louisiana is experiencing its highest case rate of West Nile virus in several years, with 145 cases and nine deaths from the disease reported so far in 2012.

"Hurricane Isaac is the most obvious threat right now. In addition, everyone needs to be mindful that we are all still at risk of contracting West Nile Virus. This has been the most active West Nile Virus season Louisiana has experienced since 2006, so it's critical that everyone takes the necessary precautions, particularly as residents return to their homes and begin clean-up efforts," said DHH Secretary Bruce D. Greenstein.

Just last week, the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals held a press conference to remind people that they need to be aware of West Nile and realize that while this virus is a serious health threat, it's also a preventable one.

"While Louisianians continue to focus on Hurricane Isaac, we still need to emphasize the importance of residents protecting themselves and their families from the West Nile Virus," said State Health Officer Dr. Jimmy Guidry.

Many people have expressed concerns about Hurricane Isaac's rain and flood effects and what this means for West Nile. Immediately after a hurricane, the floodwaters do not cause an increase in the mosquitoes that carry West Nile virus because the moving floodwaters wash away stagnant water and reduce mosquito breeding, which reduces people's risk of being bitten by an infected mosquito.

But, the coming days and weeks after the storm, as conditions begin to dry, are when people need to be very vigilant in preventing West Nile. Everyone should be mindful of dumping out containers that collected water around their homes and property to prevent mosquitoes from breeding and swarming.

While mosquitoes are not an immediate threat after floods or heavy rain, wasps and other stinging insects are very common in these conditions. Everyone should take the time to apply insect repellent, which is the best defense against contracting West Nile and against being bitten or stung by other insects.

If you will be outdoors, follow the usual precautions to prevent West Nile – apply repellent and wear protective clothing like long sleeves and long pants, and do not wear perfume or cologne. Also, when cleaning up storm damage around your home, make sure door and window screens that may have come loose are properly attached to prevent mosquitoes and other insects from getting in.

“A very important thing to realize is that we know from 10 years of surveillance that, regardless of weather conditions, West Nile virus is present in every part of the state,” Guidry said. “It has been detected in mosquito populations in each parish. If you live in a part of Louisiana that doesn’t get as much rain from Hurricane Isaac as others, you still need to be vigilant about West Nile virus and follow the same precautions. “

DHH expects to report new West Nile cases this week, but these cases should not be associated with Hurricane Isaac. There is typically a one to two-week period between when a person is infected with West Nile and when he or she begins experiencing symptoms, so any new cases doctors report to DHH will be people who were infected before this storm.

To see DHH’s latest case counts for West Nile virus, visit www.dhh.la.gov/FighttheBite.

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