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DHH Urges Residents to Protect Themselves from West Nile Virus during Hurricane Isaac Recovery

New case report delayed because of storm, but threat remains

Baton Rouge, La. – The Department of Health and Hospitals is reminding Louisiana residents that the threat of West Nile virus remains a concern as the State responds to heavy rain and flooding left by Hurricane Isaac.

“DHH staff has been working around the clock in all parts of the state to ensure the health care needs of the people of Louisiana are met during and after Hurricane Isaac,” said DHH Secretary Bruce D. Greenstein. “Even without the latest numbers, we know the West Nile virus is active in our state. Louisiana is experiencing the highest West Nile virus case rate since 2006 and we expect the numbers to continue to rise. Every Louisianan should own their own health and take the necessary precautions against mosquito bites to protect themselves and their loved ones.”

During a hurricane response, DHH’s Infectious Disease Epidemiology Section, which receives, verifies and reports the State’s West Nile cases each week, performs emergency room and shelter surveillance to monitor for and help minimize the risk of any infectious diseases (e.g. stomach viruses, flu) spreading. Because DHH’s epidemiological staff members performed these essential public health duties in response to Isaac, the office has a delay in reporting new West Nile cases. Additionally, many health care facilities closed during the week because of the weather, which means they are delayed in reporting suspected West Nile infections to DHH.

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DHH anticipates resuming weekly West Nile virus case reports next Friday. Prior to the storm, DHH had reported 145 cases and nine deaths from West Nile virus this year. To see the previous reports, visit www.dhh.louisiana.gov/FighttheBite.

Many residents have expressed concerns about the ways in which Hurricane Isaac's rain and flood will affect the state's West Nile status. Immediately after a hurricane, the floodwaters can actually have a positive impact because the moving water washes away stagnant water and reduce mosquito breeding, reducing people's risk of being bitten by an infected mosquito. The bigger risk occurs during the days and weeks after the storm, as conditions begin to dry and standing water left over from the hurricane collects. Residents need to be very vigilant about emptying containers on their property of standing water to prevent mosquitoes from breeding and swarming.

Fight the Bite

Local mosquito control partners and abatement districts remain vigilant in keeping the population of infected mosquitoes under control, but everyone has a personal responsibility to avoid mosquito bites. Health officials recommend:

- If you will be outside, you should wear a mosquito repellent containing DEET.
 - The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that repellents should contain no more than 30% DEET when used on children.
 - Insect repellents also are not recommended for children younger than 2 months. CDC recommends that you always follow the recommendations appearing on the product label when using repellent.
- People should be especially vigilant if they are outside at dawn and dusk. The mosquitoes that carry West Nile are most active at that time. But, people should take precautions against mosquitoes if they are outside at any time of day.
- Apply repellent on exposed skin and clothing. Do not apply under your clothes or on broken skin.
- To apply repellent to your face, spray on your hands and then rub on your face.
- Adults should always apply repellent to children.
- Wear long-sleeved shirts and pants when outdoors for long periods of time.
- Avoid perfumes and colognes when outdoors for extended periods of time.
- Make sure that your house has tight-fitting windows and doors, and that all screens are free of holes.
- Another effective way to prevent mosquito bites is to drain stagnant water from around homes and property to prevent mosquitoes from breeding and swarming:
 - Dispose of tin cans, ceramic pots and other unnecessary containers that have accumulated on your property.

- Turn over wheelbarrows, plastic wading pools or buckets that could collect water.
- Drill holes in the bottom of outdoor recycling containers. Drainage holes that are located on the container sides collect enough water for mosquitoes to breed.
- Clean clogged roof gutters yearly. They are often overlooked, but can produce millions of mosquitoes each season.
- Aerate ornamental pools or stock them with fish. Water gardens can become major mosquito producers if they are allowed to stagnate.
- Clean and chlorinate swimming pools that are not being used. An unattended swimming pool can produce enough mosquitoes to result in neighborhood-wide complaints. Be aware that mosquitoes may even breed in the water that collects on swimming pool covers.

Most people infected with West Nile will not have any symptoms. Those who have symptoms can experience headache, fever or stiff neck for the more serious neuro-invasive disease, or flu-like illness for West Nile fever. Check with your doctor if you experience any of these symptoms.

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