

April 22, 2004

## Alberta prepared for return of West Nile virus

Edmonton... West Nile virus is expected to re-appear this summer and the Government of Alberta has updated its response plan in order to minimize the impact of the virus in the province.

In 2003, 275 cases of human infection were reported in Alberta. The majority of those cases showed symptoms of West Nile fever, ranging from fever, severe headache and body aches to a rash. However, 49 individuals suffered the more serious symptoms associated with West Nile neurological syndrome, marked by a worsening headache and stiff neck to neurological effects such as tremors, muscle weakness and paralysis.

"People need to understand that even a mild West Nile infection can cause headaches severe enough to require bed rest for weeks," said Dr. Karen Grimsrud, Deputy Provincial Health Officer. "Of greater concern are the long-lasting and debilitating effects of West Nile neurological syndrome."

Although the risk of developing the neurological syndrome is relatively low, experts cannot predict which individuals will be hardest hit.

Four government departments will continue to gather evidence about the virus through a comprehensive surveillance program, looking for evidence of viral activity in mosquitoes, birds such as crows and magpies, horses and humans. Bird surveillance will focus on the north and west where evidence of the virus was not found last summer. As soon as six birds have tested positive to the south and east of the Highway 16 and Highway 2 corridors, bird testing will be discontinued in these areas where the virus was active in 2003.

Albertans are once again invited to participate in the bird surveillance program starting May 1, by bringing any fresh crow or magpie carcasses to the nearest Fish and Wildlife office (call 310-0000 toll-free for locations). Any found dead wildlife should be handled using gloves or plastic bags. If bird carcasses can't be brought in right away, they can be placed in a freezer. If not useful for testing, they can be wrapped in plastic and disposed of with regular household waste.

Mosquito surveillance will be enhanced in the southeast, where viral activity was greatest in 2003.

Based on the analysis of evidence from last year, and new information being gathered across the continent, the province introduced funding for municipalities to deliver mosquito control programs aimed at reducing the number of *Culex tarsalis* mosquitoes, the species most likely to carry the virus. Training workshops for municipal staff are underway.

"Targeted mosquito control programs may have some benefit as far as reducing the numbers of mosquitoes that might carry the virus," said Jock McIntosh, Alberta Environment's insect and pesticide specialist. "We have identified the areas of the province at greatest risk based on the evidence we have to date, and will work with municipalities to deliver effective programs."

"We must remember that mosquito control is not failsafe," warned Grimsrud. "We may be able to reduce the numbers of *Culex tarsalis* mosquitoes, but we cannot eliminate them completely. It will be important for all Albertans to take steps to reduce their own risk of infection, whether in their own backyard or as they travel throughout the province, the rest of Canada and the U.S."

Those steps include using an insect repellent containing DEET when outdoors, and wearing long sleeves

and pants during the evening, and specifically at dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are most active. Albertans are again being encouraged to reduce standing water around their homes. Water that collects in old tires, buckets, wheelbarrows and eave troughs is the ideal environment for mosquitoes to lay their eggs. Keeping mosquitoes outside by ensuring that window and door screens are in good repair is another important step.

Gerald Ollis, Chief Provincial Veterinarian reminded horse owners that "West Nile virus in horses is now a reportable disease in Alberta and suspicious or confirmed cases must be reported to my office." In terms of prevention, Ollis advises that a licensed vaccine for horses is available as well as information on other preventative options through local veterinarians.

In May, the Government of Alberta will launch a public awareness campaign aimed at ensuring Albertans have the information they need to reduce their risk of infection with West Nile virus. Reliable information is available on the web at [www.health.gov.ab.ca](http://www.health.gov.ab.ca), or by calling Alberta Health Link.

**Backgrounder is available at:**

<http://www.gov.ab.ca/file:///D:\WWWroot\WWWpabapps\ACN\images/2004/404/16305.pdf>

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Dial 310-0000 for toll free access outside Edmonton

Information is available on-line at <http://www.health.gov.ab.ca>

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