

Ticks, Mosquitoes & Birds – Oh, My!!!

(ARA) - The buzz lately over Avian flu, West Nile virus and Lyme disease is enough to make anyone think twice before going outdoors. Armed with insect repellent, a little knowledge and some common sense, however, your time in the great outdoors this summer can still be fun and safe.

West Nile virus has occurred in the United States for years. According to the American College of Veterinary Pathologists (ACVP), more than 14,000 people in the United States were diagnosed with the West Nile virus in the past five years, resulting in more than 500 deaths.



Infected mosquitoes are responsible for spreading the West Nile virus. Most people who have West Nile virus never show any symptoms, but the elderly are at most risk for getting serious complications. In rare instances the West Nile virus can lead to encephalitis or meningitis.

The best way to protect yourself and your family from West Nile virus is to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes. It's not as hard as it seems. Just try a few of these tips:

- * Wear insect repellent containing DEET, picaridin or oil of lemon eucalyptus when you are outside.
- * Avoid going outside at dusk and dawn, when mosquitoes are most active, or wear long pants and sleeves during those times.
- * Check your doors and window screens to make sure there are no gaps, holes or tears mosquitoes could come in through.
- * Destroy mosquito breeding grounds by eliminating standing water. Drain flowerpots, buckets, etc., and change the water in pet dishes and birdbaths often, at least once a week.
- * Be on the lookout for any dead birds and other animals and report any to your local health department. Avoid contact with the carcass as it may make you sick. Many bird deaths may indicate that the West Nile virus is in the area. In rare instances, it may also be an indication that Avian influenza may have entered the United States.

Avian flu has been in the news a lot lately. The specific type of avian flu that has decimated millions of poultry flocks around the world has infected more than 200 people. More than half of those infected have died.

As of late May, no cases of Avian flu in birds had been detected in the Western hemisphere. The virus has been in Southeast Asia for approximately 10 years, and more recently in Europe, but it has yet to spread to the United States. There are substantial geographic barriers, so it's hard to predict whether it ever will spread to the United States, according to Dr. Thijs Kuiken of the ACVP.

“Because this kind of Avian flu has had a very limited number of cases in humans and has not been detected in the United States, I advise that families do not need to take any precautionary steps relating to this disease,” said Dr. Kuiken.

Only if the current virus were to mutate into a form that would be easily transferable from person to person could it reach a global epidemic. And, according to Dr. Kuiken, such a mutation is unlikely to happen with this virus.

You should also be on the lookout for ticks, which are carriers for Lyme disease and encephalitis. Follow these suggestions to minimize your risk:

- * Try to avoid tick-infested areas by walking in the middle of trails to avoid brushing against vegetation. Ticks also hide out in wooded areas. Local health departments and park rangers will be able to tell you which specific areas to avoid.

- * Wear light-colored clothing, so you can easily see any ticks on you. Hats, long sleeves and pant cuffs tucked into socks give you the most protection.

- * Wear insect repellent.

- * Check yourself and your clothing for ticks every time you come indoors. Use a mirror to search yourself. Remove any ticks that you find carefully with tweezers. Also check your pets when they come indoors, as they can carry ticks in with them. The Center for Disease Control advises putting any infested clothing in the dryer, which will kill ticks.

For more information about these diseases, visit www.acvp.org/news.

Courtesy of ARA Content