

Hawai'i is West Nile free, but vigilance needed

Kia'i Moku

By Joylynn Paman



In the late 1930s, a virus surfaced in Africa, eventually

spreading throughout Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North and South America. In 1999, the virus made its first appearance on American soil when large numbers of crows began dying in New York City. Health officials struggled to find the cause, yet in the mean time, four people died of the same virus. Eventually, the disease was identified as West Nile virus (WNV), a virus that is primarily spread between infected birds and infected mosquitoes, but may also be passed onto humans, horses, or other animals by infected mosquitoes.

Since 1999, WNV has spread rapidly throughout the continental U.S., leaving Hawai'i and Alaska as the last two remaining states yet to be affected. The numbers are staggering. In 1999, the East Coast had a total of 62 WNV cases and 7 deaths. From 1999 to 2006, there were 23,967 cases and 955 deaths reported to the Centers for Disease Control.

Although there have been no reported cases of WNV in horses, mosquitoes, birds or people in Hawai'i, WNV is knocking on the front door of our Aloha state and could arrive at any time. With a year-round mosquito season, Hawai'i is especially vulnerable to the spread of the disease. Both the day-biting and night-biting mosquitoes can carry WNV, as well as other diseases such as encephalitis, yellow fever, dengue, and malaria.

Because of Hawai'i's status

as an international destination, we probably can't stop WNV from arriving. All it takes is one infected mosquito arriving by plane or container. If the disease is caught early, there is a chance of keeping it from spreading across Hawai'i. The most important actions we can take within Maui County and throughout the state are to become familiar with WNV symptoms and to report dead birds that might have the virus.

Most people who are infected show no symptoms of the virus and are often unaware that they have been infected. Some may experience mild illness and recover fully. Mild symptoms include fever, headache, tiredness, and body aches, occasionally with a skin rash and swollen glands. Infrequently, humans may experience a more advanced illness including headache, high fever, neck stiffness, disorientation, convulsions, muscle weakness, paralysis, inflammation and infection of the brain and surrounding membranes of the brain and spinal cord. Very rarely infected persons may die from the disease. People over 50 and those with weakened immune systems seem to be more at risk.

Horses infected with WNV may show signs of incoordination, weakness, especially in the rear legs, muscle twitching, fever, drooping lips, teeth grinding, blindness, seizures or coma. If your horse shows any of these clinical signs, you should contact your veterinarian. There are WNV vaccines available for horses, which also can be discussed with your veterinarian. Unlike dengue fever, a human or a horse that is infected with WNV does not have a high enough concentration of the virus to be a source of virus for biting mosquitoes.

As New York City noted, one of the first signs of the virus is likely to be dead birds. You can help by calling 2-1-1 to report dead birds you might find. A trained operator will ask a few questions and if the bird sounds like it might have West Nile Virus, someone will be sent to pick it up for testing. Some birds are more of a concern than others. In general, collection is not required for pigeons, doves, mynahs, feral chickens, or owned poultry, unless there are multiple deaths.

You also can do your part to reduce the mosquito population on your property. During the dengue scare, most people became very vigilant about reducing mosquito-friendly habitat. That same vigilance should be rekindled to limit the possible spread of WNV. One mosquito can lay thousands of eggs, but they need standing water to do so. Check around your house, and empty anything that collects water...like old tires and cans. Flush out plants, such as bromeliads, that collect water at least once a week. Fix leaky faucets, and make sure gutters drain properly. Change water in vases or birdbaths frequently. If you have a fishpond, put in fish that will eat mosquito larvae. And remember to protect yourself from mosquitoes, using repellent outdoors and avoiding areas where there are lots of mosquitoes.

And what's with bird flu anyway? Avian influenza (aka "bird flu") is a very different virus, which rarely infects humans. It is not spread by mosquitoes. Dur-

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ing outbreaks of bird flu among poultry (domesticated chicken, ducks, and turkeys), people who have regular contact with infected birds are at risk of contracting the disease. Government agencies are testing live migratory birds for avian influenza as well as dead feral chickens. If you find a dead feral chicken other than an obvious roadkill, call the Maui Invasive Species Committee at 573-MISC (6472) and we will pick it up for testing.

There is no cure or specific medicine for West Nile fever at this time and it will take years before research on a cure is complete. So in the mean time, help protect yourself and Hawai'i from this disease. Get to know the symptoms. Report dead birds and reduce mosquito populations around your home. By doing your part to detect West Nile virus, you are helping to ensure that Maui County remains a healthy place for all to enjoy.

• "Kia'i Moku" (or "Guarding the Island") is prepared by the Maui Invasive Species Committee to provide information on protecting the island from invasive plants and animals that can threaten the island's environment, economy and quality of life. Joylynn Paman, is public relations and education specialist with the MISC.