

This summer the simple mosquito bite may take on a whole new meaning in California. This is the year the mosquito transmitted West Nile Virus problem is predicted to be a West Coast problem. I don't know about anybody else, but I wanted to know what this all means for our dog and cat family members; after all, mosquitoes like dog and cat blood just as well and human blood. A visit to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention web site provided some interesting information.

West Nile Virus (WNV) was first identified in the African country of Uganda in 1937. Since then it has been found in many other areas including Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. In 1999 it was identified in the New York area, and has spread westward over the past few years. Mosquitoes carry the virus from infected wild birds to other animals and people. The virus causes disease of the central nervous system, but even in areas of the country where West Nile Virus is present, incidence of serious neurologic illness in people appears to be very low. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) less than 1% of the human infections result in serious neurologic illness, with less than 20% of human cases displaying mild symptoms (fever, malaise, headache, etc). The vast majority of people exhibit no symptoms at all with WNV infection. Geriatric, very young, or immune compromised individuals are at increased risk for illness from WNV.

When it comes to domestic animals, horses seem to be at most risk for developing serious illness. Dogs and cats can readily become infected through mosquito bites but rarely, if ever become ill. Nationwide in 2003 the CDC reported less than 40 cases of WNV infected dogs and only one infection in a cat. In one study, dogs experimentally infected with WNV showed no symptoms of illness and cats showed very mild symptoms (mild fever, lethargy). There is some evidence that cats may also become infected through the ingestion of WNV infected mice, but again, the actual illness caused by the infection is mild or non-existent. There is no documented evidence for direct dog or cat-to-person transmission of the virus. The bottom line for dog and cat owners is that there's little chance for significant illness from the West Nile Virus. Horse owners on the other hand should be concerned and should consult their veterinarian about currently available equine WNV vaccines.

According to the CDC we should all take some simple steps to reduce our risks for WNV infection. This is especially true in the months ahead as the WNV problem is predicted to worsen in our area.

- 1) Avoid mosquito bites by avoiding outdoor activity during dusk and dawn, periods when mosquitoes are most active.
- 2) When outside, wear long pants and a long sleeve shirt.
- 3) Use insect repellents containing the chemical DEET for people (follow label instructions and cautions carefully). Never use DEET containing repellents on dogs and cats. A permethrin containing repellent would be more suitable for pets but always check with your veterinarian first because some permethrin products may be unsafe in cats.
- 4) Be sure home screen doors and windows are in good repair.

- 5) Eliminate outdoor standing water sources, which are ideal mosquito breeding areas.
- 6) If you find a dead bird don't handle it with bare hands. Contact your local Health Department for information on handling and disposing of the body.
- 7) Go online at www.cdc.gov/westnile for more information.

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