

Chico woman hospitalized with West Nile virus

By LARRY MITCHELL - Staff Writer, ChicoER.com

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CHICO — An elderly Chico woman has been in the hospital for more than a week with West Nile virus — the first human case of the illness in Butte County this year.

Her condition appears to be improving, said Butte County Health Officer Dr. Mark Lundberg in a phone interview Wednesday.

The woman, who lives in southeast Chico, may have been bitten about two weeks ago by a mosquito carrying the virus, he said.

She developed the neuroinvasive form of West Nile disease, the severe kind, which affects the brain.

Lundberg said she had a fever and felt confused and disoriented, so she saw her doctor and was then put in the hospital.

"I'm just happy her form of the disease was not as severe as we've seen in the past, where people became gravely ill," he said. "We wish her a full recovery."

So far this year in California, there have been 19 human cases of West Nile virus in eight counties. There have been no deaths.

People over 50 are more likely to experience serious symptoms if they get the virus. Recent data indicates that those with diabetes or hypertension may be at greatest risk for developing severe symptoms, according to a news release from the Public Health Department.

Lundberg said the risk of infection with West Nile is highest in July and August. He recommended people take precautions by avoiding being outside when mosquitoes are prevalent, in the early morning and evening.

If you have to be outside at those times, wear long sleeves and long pants, he said, and use an effective repellent. Recommended are repellents containing DEET, oil of lemon eucalyptus, Picaridin or IR3535.

Matt Ball, manager of the Butte County Mosquito and Vector Control District, said there haven't been many signs of West Nile in Chico this year.

A dead bird infected with the virus was found about five miles out of town, he said. The district has trapped a lot of mosquitoes in Chico, but none has tested positive for West Nile, he said.

"It's disturbing," Ball said of the news that someone had become ill from West Nile virus.

The mosquito population this year has been relatively low, as low as he's seen it in the 15 years he has worked for the district, he said.

"It doesn't take 10 million mosquitoes. Just one is enough to put you in the hospital with your brain swelling," he said.

With the low mosquito population, Ball said he hoped the county might get through the year without a human case. If it had, it would have been the first time since the virus appeared here in 2004.

He said the county had seven cases in 2004, 25 in 2005, 34 in 2006, 16 in 2007, six in 2008, and two in 2009.

One person died of the illness in 2004, two in 2005, two in 2006, and two in 2007.

Most people who contract West Nile experience no symptoms or very mild ones. Those kinds of cases usually go unreported, Ball said.

Within a week or two, county residents will probably see a lot more mosquitoes, but not the kind that carry West Nile virus, he said.

These will be the Western malaria mosquito, which can carry malaria. Fortunately, Ball said, there hasn't been any malaria around for decades.

At the end of August each year, the Western malaria mosquitoes, which breed in the rice fields, "peak" for two or three weeks, he said. He described them as very aggressive insects that don't mind flying right in your face. Their bite often leaves a large red welt.

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