

MOSQUITO-BORNE DISEASE

Virus kills crow, raising concerns about West Nile

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After one of the rainiest winters in years, West Nile virus has made an early appearance in Santa Clara County in 2011, with confirmation coming Friday that a crow has become the first casualty of the disease. And with warmer temperatures on the way, officials worry that the South Bay has all the ingredients to make this summer one of the worst for the virus.

Tuesday's discovery of a dead crow in Sunnyvale came more than two weeks earlier than 2010's first reported sign of the West Nile virus.

"If we get extremely warm weather in May, the higher temperatures could trigger increased West Nile virus activity," said Vicki Kramer, chief of the Vector-Borne Disease Section of the California Department of Public Health.

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ONLINE EXTRA

Do you worry about getting West Nile from a mosquito bite? Vote in our poll at www.mercurynews.com/extra.

West Nile

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American crows, as well as some hawks, sparrows, finches and tree squirrels, serve as reservoirs for the mosquito-borne West Nile virus, said Jose Colome, vector control community resource specialist for Santa Clara County. Mosquitoes transmit the virus to humans. It normally causes flu-like symptoms but in rare cases can cause severe brain inflammation and even death.

After a high of 880 cases in humans statewide in 2005, the past couple of years have averaged about 100 cases, Kramer said. But that may have been due to drier weather the past few years, she said.

Heavy rain and snow earlier this year created ideal conditions for mosquitoes to breed, and other parts of California already are seeing an unusually large number of the insects, Kramer said.

Santa Clara County hasn't noticed an increase in mosquitoes, said Colome, but the county will set traps in the area where the bird was found to test mosquito populations.

So far, the state has identified only one other bird that

died of the virus — in Sacramento County — and one group of mosquitoes that are infected with it.

"It's still very quiet, but we're keeping our fingers crossed," said Truc Dever, director of community affairs with the greater Los Angeles County Vector Control District. "If it starts to pick up in a bunch of counties all across the state, we may have a problem."

But California residents and vector control departments have to remain vigilant because West Nile virus is endemic in the state, she said.

"It's not going away. It'll always be here, out there in low levels," Dever said.

Since 2004, 16 people have been infected with West Nile in Santa Clara County, but no one has been infected since 2008, said Sara Cody, a physician and deputy health officer at the Santa Clara County Department of Public Health.

That may be because of the county's aggressive mosquito-control policies, she said.

Santa Clara County first tries to get rid of as much standing water as possible. The county encourages residents to dump standing water from their properties and to report any abandoned swimming pools, ponds and other

HOW TO AVOID MOSQUITO BITES

- Wear long-sleeve shirts and long pants when you are outdoors.

- Place mosquito netting over infant carriers.

- Consider staying indoors at dawn, dusk and in the early evening, when mosquitoes are most active.

- Install tight-fitting screens over windows and doors.

- Apply insect repellent. Choose a repellent that contains DEET.

- Spray clothing with repellents containing permethrin because mosquitoes may bite through thin clothing. Do not apply repellents containing permethrin directly to exposed skin.

Note: Vitamin B1 and "ultra-sonic" devices are not effective in preventing mosquito bites.

Source: Santa Clara County Department of Public Health

their pools, just one backyard swimming pool can breed thousands of mosquitoes that can then infiltrate the neighborhood," Kramer said.

Once officials identify potential breeding grounds, the county provides free mosquito-fish to eat the mosquito larvae before they become infectious adults. The county also uses naturally occurring soil bacteria that kill mosquito larvae in water.

If, however, officials detect mosquito populations infected with West Nile virus after having first found a bird that died of the disease, they use insecticides such as pyrethrin that kill adult mosquitoes.

Santa Clara County residents raised concerns about the use of this insecticide for large-scale fogging last year. The insecticide was used only in the most extreme cases, Colome said.

And ultimately, the best way to avoid West Nile virus is to protect yourself from mosquito bites, Colome said. "Wear long pants and long-sleeve shirts, use DEET or other mosquito repellents, avoid going outside at dusk and dawn, and use windows with tight-fitting screens," he said.

potential mosquito breeding grounds. In the past, the county also has done aerial surveys to find abandoned pools.

"As homes are foreclosed or residents can't maintain

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