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Health District Investigating Possible Human Case of West Nile Virus

September 18, 2008 (Yakima, WA) — The Yakima Health District (YHD) is investigating a probable case of West Nile Virus (WNV) in the lower valley. The probable case, a female in her fifties, was first brought to the attention of health officials after preliminary testing performed at a commercial laboratory revealed elevated levels of antibodies to WNV. The individual also reported a history of mosquito bites along with symptoms such as fever, headaches, muscle aches, sore throat and a rash that started in mid-August. These symptoms are consistent with the mild form of infection known as “WNV fever.” The individual reports no recent travel outside of the county and is currently recovering.

Although additional tests run at the Washington State Department of Health’s Public Health Laboratory have also come back positive, confirmatory tests performed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia must also show positive results before the individual can be confirmed as a case of WNV. The CDC’s results are expected sometime in early October. In the interim, it remains safe and wise to assume that WNV is present in the community and is being transmitted to humans.

Although WNV has been detected in Yakima County horses, birds, and/or mosquitoes over the past four consecutive summers, this would still be the first human case of WNV *proven* to have been acquired in Yakima County. A western Washington blood donor appeared to have acquired an asymptomatic WNV infection in late July 2008 either here in Yakima County or in Oregon, but the exact location at the time of infection could not be determined.

“While this would represent the first *confirmation* of a locally acquired human case, the presence of WNV in horses, birds and mosquitoes in the area suggests that many more asymptomatic human infections or undiagnosed cases of WNV fever have probably occurred, as well,” observes Dr. Christopher Spitters, the Health Officer for Yakima County.

Only one in five infected people develop symptoms of WNV. The onset of illness occurs 3-14 days after being infected by the bite of a mosquito carrying the virus. Illness typically resolves without medical intervention. Symptoms include varying degrees of fever, headache, body aches, rash, and swollen lymph nodes. A more serious form of WNV disease affects less than 1 percent of symptomatic cases, producing symptoms such as neck stiffness, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness, paralysis, or even death. Individuals over 50

years of age appear to be more susceptible to developing this more serious form of WNV. People experiencing any of the above symptoms should consult their medical provider.

“The possibility for human cases of WNV has been a reality since the virus was first detected in our county several years ago” says Laura Charters, Environmental Health Specialist with the Yakima Health District. “We don’t want residents to be overly alarmed by this news. Instead, our hope is that by knowing there is a possible case in our county, residents will become even more diligent about reducing breeding grounds, avoiding mosquito infested areas, and using mosquito repellent when necessary.”

The message on what residents should do to prevent WNV remains the same;

1. Eliminate standing water that mosquitoes breed in. Anything that can hold water can become a mosquito breeding ground in less than a week. Health officials recommend changing water in pet bowls, animal troughs and bird baths at least once weekly, fixing leaky faucets that can create puddles and emptying saucers for potted plants regularly.
2. Avoid being bitten by mosquitoes altogether. Screen windows and doors that remain open for ventilation. When possible, avoid being outside at dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are most active. People should also cover their skin by wearing long pants, long-sleeved shirts, socks, and shoes. Mosquito repellents containing DEET, Picaridin, oil of lemon eucalyptus, or IR3535 are safe and effective against mosquitoes when used according to label instructions.

WNV transmission tends to cease when the first overnight frost occurs in the fall (usually in late October or early November).

For more information on West Nile Virus visit the YHD Website at www.yakimapublichealth.org.

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