

7-20-12 EEE Returns. What Will You do?

Last Wednesday, July 11, 2012, health agents received recorded messages via the HHAN, Health and Homeland Alert Network. However, when my cell phone, desk phone and main office phone began ringing at the same time, and I heard that it was a HHAN message, it had my attention.

Last week's HHAN message said that it was for health agents of the Southeastern part of the State. That's when I suspected that we were going to hear of this season's first positive results in mosquitoes for Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE). When I called in, joining more than 80 others, our State Department of Public Health was keeping its promise to notify us right away and before releasing statements to the press. The news was that the Town of Easton had four collections or "pools" of mosquitoes testing positive for EEE. This is early in the season for that news and is something to pay attention to!

The second serious aspect of the conference call concerned the species of mosquitoes testing positive for EEE. There are so many species and each has their own habits and habitats. Two of the collections with EEE were known to be bird biters. The other two collections were known to be mammal biters. This is very early for the disease to have "ventured" out of the swamp, containing bird biters, to the uplands of mammal biting mosquitoes. When this happens this early in the summer, leaving lots of time for the amplification and further spread of the disease, it is truly time to be aware and take action. What has happened in Easton is a warning for what will most likely happen elsewhere in SE Massachusetts.

Our Department of Public Health may recommend "spot treatment" of localized aerial spraying for the Easton area. That had not been determined yet last week. If they do, will we be chasing the disease, as it begins to occur in other historical hotspots such as Halifax, Plympton, Carver, Lakeville and Middleboro? In order to make those decisions of spraying, DPH is gathering additional information with more trap sites and collections and also working with our Mosquito Control Programs' own traps to base the decisions on scientific data and as much as can be gathered in a speedy manner. That is a good thing and something else to be thankful for.

For instance, repeated samples from towns with EEE positive results have not seen those results repeated yet. So, DPH is getting ready to go if aerial spraying is needed but they are waiting for enough evidence to make it the right thing to do. By looking at almost daily samples of mosquitoes, be assured that they are doing more than usual and all they can to stay informed. That's good science.

This July brings us face to face, or face to proboscis, with our primary defense; that of self-defense. Even if the State were to provide aerial spraying of pesticides all over the southeastern part of Massachusetts, we would still have some mosquitoes left. And any one of

those surviving could carry EEE. We have no way of identifying tiny mosquitoes with and without disease. Our best offense is defense. It always is. There's no escaping that. It is our responsibility to protect ourselves and our children.

Wear repellent. Read the directions, as some are not for the very young. If you are a real outdoors person, consider treating your hats, shirts, socks and pants with permethrin. Permethrin is not intended for the skin but once applied and dried on clothing, it does not penetrate the skin and it lasts for up to five cold water washes! It is my best weapon against ticks and mosquitoes, as permethrin kills them; repellents only repel. I do not want those bugs on me if I can help it!

Avoid the dusk to dawn outdoor activities. Easton will be "curtailing" outdoor evening activities. Will you?

Maintain screens in good repair. Remember, a patched screen works just as well as a new one! Nothing wrong with that!

Remove local standing water. Rinse bird baths every four days. Tip over pots and water-holding toys and children's outdoor play equipment. Put tarps, plastic bags and old pool liners in your garage or shed; for when they are kept, or abandoned, outdoors, all those creases and folds are plenty enough stagnant water for breeding mosquitoes! Don't have a garage or shed? Then throw those things away. Also, larvicides such as "Dunks" or Altosid can be dropped into catch-basins or ditches with stagnant water.

Thomas Fuller said in 1902, "He who cures a disease may be the skillfullest, but he who prevents it is the safest physician." Be safe; use all your personal protection measures and do all you can to prevent the bite!

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