

08-10-18 Right on Time as the Temperature Climbs

This year has thankfully been quieter than previous years when it comes to the deadly mosquito borne disease, Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE). However, right on time, as the temperature climbs in mid-August, the mosquitoes are thriving.

EEE's cousin, West Nile virus (WNV) is doing very well! Last week we received Health and Homeland Alert Network notice of its arrival in many towns. Seventy- one Massachusetts towns have positive results! It is as near as Kingston and Cohasset, and all the way out to little Bernardston, and Worcester to Boston.

The unique characteristic of West Nile virus is that its winged carriers prefer to breed in containers, or small amounts of stagnant water. The mother mosquito sees that green slimy water as nutrient rich for her babies. We tend to see more WNV in urban areas because there are more barrels, dumpsters and construction sites in urban areas. This year, though, they are venturing out to the bubs and the country. Do you care? It doesn't get people's attention, does it?

While West Nile virus can be a mild, and even undetected disease, it can be deadly to those over fifty-five. That is about forty percent of the population for Halifax and Plympton! Please prevent this disease by preventing the containers of stagnant water. Drain those pools, rinse those bird baths and tarps and get rid of those tires, or drill or slice them, or fill them with dirt, so they cannot hold water. Please hose those dumpsters once a week. We have little control over the swamp mosquitoes breeding EEE, but we have lots of control over containers. Lots. We can do this!

Another creature venturing out at this time of year are the young bats. They are called pups and like any pup, they make mistakes; they don't know their way around. They might fly down the chimney, rather than up, or, instead of out the opening in the attic vent, or whatever path its parent takes. The same is true on its way back to the roost. They get lost and maybe your cat finds it, instead the bat pup's mom. Such is the way of nature, of course, even with our own children; except that bats can carry rabies. Rabies can be prevented in humans with a series of prophylactic shot. If, however, exposure was not recognized, then there is no treatment. You get rabies, you die from rabies.

Most bats are not carrying this dreaded disease. And, yet, most human case of rabies in the United States, are from bats. The difference between bats and other potentially rabid animals, such as raccoons or foxes, is that bats seek out cavities for their roosts. With hollow trees and barns declining, it makes for a difficult housing market for the bats. So, they will seek out other places such as our attics. So, you see, it is not that the bat is more likely to be rabid than the fox; it is more likely that the bat will have closer contact with humans than the fox.

There is another perplexing, complicated and somewhat confusing aspect to the topic of exposure when it comes to bats, as opposed to the fox. You know when a fox has scratched or

bitten you. You might not know that its saliva can expose you to rabies but, again, because it is a large animal, compared to a tiny bat; when asked by the animal control officer or the health agent, if the fox hissed at you, you know the answer. And you certainly know if that fox's saliva landed on your face or in your eyes. This spitting at close proximity scenario is more likely out in your back yard; not your bedroom. Right?

What if you woke up in the middle of the night to the sounds of something fluttering about your bedroom? What if a child woke up to a bat in his or her room? What if a person who because of age, mental challenges, medication or intoxication woke up to a bat in the room? Would any of those people be able to tell you with certainty that the bat did not have contact?

Believe it or not, a bat's teeth are so tiny, that the bite is not always felt and does not always leave a noticeable mark. In these circumstances, it is important to get that bat submitted to the state lab for testing.

Someone called just last week describing this exact scenario and the bat was submitted for testing. Hopefully, it is negative but if it is positive, a life will be saved with vaccine.

When in doubt, make a call to your local Board of Health. If it is after hours, call the police and they can contact the health agent. When more advice is needed, we can call our Department of Public Health. They have an epidemiologist on call 24-7!

All's well that ends well that is handled well.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. You can contact her at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us