

08-23-13 Bugs on the Wing

While Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE) has been quieter this year than last, we have now passed the mid-August point and that is when that potential killer traditionally begins to really escalate; with mid-August to mid-September being the peak human risk period of its disease spreading activity. The disease carrying has been in place for months, perhaps even a continuation since last year, but the process of “amplification” takes time and the crescendo usually begins in mid-August. Unfortunately, right on time, EEE has already taken the life of an eighty year old woman from Weymouth; with the disease contracted mid-August. It is a tragedy, as someone said to me, “Imagine living all those years, only to die from a mosquito bite.”

While the elderly (and the very young) are more likely to develop the brain inflammation (the encephalitis) and die from EEE, those who survive generally do so with serious permanent damage, leaving them severely disabled or “living” in a nursing home. There are rare cases of healthy adults who survive with minimal and manageable consequences. This is why the disease is referred to as “deadly or dire” and it is one reason why it gets our attention, even though it is still considered a rare disease. Would you take lightly those statistics indicating the rarity, if your loved one, your child, died of EEE or remained in a coma, never to speak to you again?

Once this terrible disease has affected your life, you have learned something you will never forget: mosquitoes are capable of carrying life threatening disease.

However, at least in the past, those people who learned that lesson were few, because it is, in fact, rare. Not only is the disease rare, it used to be that it was, or seemed to be, cyclical, appearing every fifteen to twenty years and then disappearing again. That meant that one generation, and only in particular areas, heard about it and only those few affected really remembered it. The majority of people did not even tell their children about it or take personal precautions, such as using repellants, because on the whole, this tiny insect was perceived as a nuisance; not a threat to life.

Now, for whatever reason, be it climate change, or insects moving into new localities, or birds migrating differently, EEE has reappeared, not only more frequently, but also in areas where it had never been seen. One such area is Amherst and Belchertown. They had never seen EEE and, suddenly, with positive results in mosquitoes and then a horse case, they are scrambling to learn about mosquitoes and wishing they had a Mosquito Control Program, as we do here.

Here, on the “South Shore”, when it is August and I see the birds beginning to gather for their migration, as is happening now with blackbirds, I find myself on edge, waiting and expecting positive results for EEE. And so, each day as of late, I wondered if I would receive a call from the Department of Public Health (DPH) about EEE found in our area. Recently, on a Friday, while out in the woods at a perc test, I received the call. Of course, I had on my tick socks, long sleeve shirt, bucket hat and repellant but I still couldn’t help but looking over my

shoulder for the lurking blood sucker; for the positive finding of EEE was found in a bird biting mosquito and they live in the swampy woods (where I was working!). I could not help but think that blood is blood, when the little vampires need it. I made a mental note to request more ground spraying for schools and swampy areas.

At this point, there isn't the need for an aerial spraying looming over us, in response to numerous positive results for Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE) in several locations. It is out there, though, along with its cousin, West Nile virus (WNV).

I hope you realize that West Nile virus is just about everywhere and its winged carriers prefer to breed in containers, or small amounts of stagnant water. West Nile virus is usually a mild, even undetected disease, but can be deadly to those over fifty five. On Monday afternoon, my office began to receive calls about a "confirmed human case of West Nile virus in Plymouth County." When I sent out this column, I did not have DPH's confirmation of this to health agents.

Please don't wait for a case before you respond to this very present disease. Please prevent it 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.

Bugs might be on the wing but we want to take all precautions so that we can sing; sing while enjoying nature and respecting nature. Respect nature while taking full responsibility for you and your family. That is the choice we are given. Are you up to the challenge? I say you are worth it! Spread the word!

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