

9-6-18 Knowledge and Awareness are Power

While a little knowledge of mosquitoes can come in handy for trivia games, the diseases they carry are no trivial matter at all. When asked, what is the most dangerous animal in the world, many people will think of the one that frightens them the most, say, a shark or a bear. The answer is a mosquito. The World Health Organization estimates that the diseases spread by mosquitoes kill 725,000 people yearly.

If we lived in Africa, we would be very cognizant of malaria killing many thousands of people, and almost half a million each year in eighty-seven countries with warm climates. In the United States people tend to forget how dangerous these tiny insects are, as the diseases they carry here are considered rare, with five to seven cases per year. There are a couple other reasons we tend to forget how dangerous they can be. Ordinarily, they are nothing more than an annoyance. The out-of-the-ordinary-times, when there are outbreaks of the deadly virus Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE), used to arrive in cycles every ten to twenty years. If you were not personally affected during one of those outbreaks, it is easy for the mind to tuck that away into a category of “things that happen to others, in other places”.

Climate change has brought milder winters and wet autumns and springs, and this is the only reason I am aware of that we see outbreaks of EEE more often. After five-year-old Adreanna Wing died in Halifax in 2005, and others in other towns in 2006, I hoped I would not see another outbreak in my career as a health agent. Then, it returned in the years 2010 to 2012. We are now seeing the third outbreak in fifteen years, with many horse cases, four human cases and one of those, fifty-nine-year old Laurie Sylvia, has died from EEE.

Yes, it is frightening and yes, we must do all we can to prevent the bite of mosquitoes, as there is no treatment. Those who do survive generally suffer with serious neurological problems.

Now, it is time to share the message that You Have the Power to Protect Yourself!

This message is the result of Kathy Downey, resident of Mattapoisett and public health nurse for Marion. During a conference call with our Department of Public Health last Thursday, she was describing her experience of witnessing

parents and grandparents being very frightened by this outbreak of EEE and requested help for making messages empowering rather than frightening.

I so welcomed this request and yet, we are faced with a potentially deadly disease. How do we inform people without frightening them?

So, the current message is “You have the power to protect yourself”.

I recently learned a new protection measure in addition to the often-listed ones. For me, this is exciting!

First, continue to use the following protection measures:

- Use EPA approved repellants
- When possible, wear long pants and shirts in light colors
- Stay indoors from dusk to dawn
- When outside, add fans to create a breeze
- Wear permethrin treated clothing that kill ticks and mosquitoes
- Cover baby carriages with netting. (This used to be common practice and seems to have fallen out of vogue.)
- Repair screens
- Do not allow standing water. Remove tarps, empty buckets and rinse bird baths twice a week.
- Reschedule evening outdoor events to daytime

And here is the new tool:

- Spray repellants such as DEET, Picaridin or lemon eucalyptus on clothing, as well as skin. Note that it may stain the cloth and could ruin expensive waterproof material.

This new protection tool was an unexpected finding in a study by Consumer Reports, comparing permethrin treated clothing and clothing sprayed with DEET. The clothing sprayed with DEET was more effective than the expensive permethrin treated clothing! And the treated clothing from places such as L.L. Bean is expensive!

The study can be found at:

<https://www.consumerreports.org/insect-repellent/permethrin-treated-clothing/>

Yes, little mosquitoes are highly successful creatures. We want to succeed in protecting ourselves from them. Knowledge and awareness of those protective measures empower us to do all we can to prevent the bite! You have the power to protect yourself. Employ that power!

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cathleen.drinan@halifax-ma.org