

West Nile Virus – Need for Panic?

Which of these phrases puts more fear in your heart – “lightning strike,” “getting the flu,” “traffic accident,” or “West Nile Virus?” If you are like most people, “West Nile Virus” won, hands down. But should it?

Sociologists have struggled for hundreds of years with how to predict or reduce peoples’ fear. Why, for instance, does one person scream at the sight of a snake, while another picks it up without a single shudder?

Basic survival is at the root of our fears, of course. The adrenaline rush that accompanies a surge of fear is a helpful thing if a bear is after you, or you need super-quick reflexes to avoid the strike of a poisonous snake. But once the initial wave is over, then what? We like to think our logic, our intelligence and our rational thought will win out over fear, but the West Nile Virus is proving, once again, that we are fearful, reactive (over reactive?) animals in our hearts.

This virus scares us far worse than incidents that are more likely to be fatal. For example, 24 people died in Michigan this year, NOT from West Nile Virus, but from traffic accidents over the Fourth of July holiday. But did that stop people from driving? Over 300 died nationwide from lightning strikes. (And don’t think you’re safe in Michigan from that national statistic – Michigan always ranks in the top ten states for lightning casualties.) Yet people still stay outside and GOLF during thunderstorms. And the flu, that we take so for granted with the approach of fall, will take the lives of 20,000 people before next spring. Yet family gatherings in the midst of flu season will go on.

So why don’t these threats frighten most people the way a mosquito-borne illness does? **Especially a disease like West Nile Virus, that will occur in only ONE PERCENT of mosquitoes in an infected region and make only ONE PERCENT of the people infected with the disease severely ill!!** Those statistics don’t make you safe from this disease, but they do mean you are FAR MORE LIKELY to die from the flu, a lightning strike or a car accident than from West Nile Virus.

I wish I understood better how to help people with their fears, because once again, our society is waging war on itself with “solutions” to a mosquito-borne illness. To protect ourselves from West Nile Virus, we are told by public officials to 1) remove standing water from our yards, because that’s where mosquitoes breed. 2) Cut down tall vegetation, because that’s where adult mosquitoes hide during the day. 3) Don’t go outside in the evening or early morning. 4) Spray yourself and your children with pesticides containing DEET, while 5) mosquito control vehicles spray malathion-based pesticides along public roads.

But what are we losing when we take these measures? 1) Those same pools of standing water that mosquitoes breed in are also home to spring frogs, fairy shrimp, and millions of other microscopic invertebrates that are critical parts of the natural food web. 2) The tall grass that hides adult mosquitoes also provides cover for migrating white-throated sparrows, overwintering juncos, and nesting song sparrows next spring. 3) Not going outside in the evening or early morning means you lose the peak times for wildlife watching. 4) Spray yourself with

DEET, but BE SURE to read the label, which is full of cautions about the dangers of absorbing it into your bloodstream. In fact, the label will tell you to NOT spray DEET on children under the age of 2 AT ALL! 5) Spraying pesticides along the roads kills NOT ONLY mosquitoes, but nearly every insect and arthropod the spray droplets come in contact with over the next 24 hours, including butterflies, moths, fireflies, and spiders.

So how do you as an individual, or we as a society, make decisions about how to deal with threats to our health? I can't tell you what to decide for yourself where the West Nile Virus is concerned, and I have only one vote as a member of society. But personally, I'm going to continue to enjoy the benefits of frog pools and tall grass in my yard, and I will enjoy watching the wildlife there every evening. Yes, I will acknowledge the threat of disease and the discomfort of a mosquito bite by wearing long sleeves and pants, and if there is a surge of mosquitoes that I just can't stand, I will use a repellent. But stop going outside, stop providing wildlife habitat, and instead use heavy doses of pesticides that are more questionable threats to my health than a mosquito bite? Not for me! At that point, I believe the benefit has outweighed the risk by a large margin.

Every day, I take the risk of driving to work. But to reduce the risk of a fatal accident, I wear a seatbelt and drive as safely as I can. I risk getting struck by lightning when I stand at a window and watch the "light show," but I reduce the risk by being inside in the first place. And come Christmas, I'll get together with family members, even though that will increase my chances of getting the flu, or of giving it to an elderly family member who may die from it. Just as in these risky situations, we have to decide when the RISK of getting West Nile Virus is no longer worth the LOSS to our enjoyment of life if we go too far in protecting ourselves from it.

--Janea Little
Senior Naturalist