



COUNTY of CUMBERLAND

Public Information Office

Mitzi R. Champion

Public Information Director

August 26, 2003

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Parents Warned Against Viruses

By Rebekah Sanderlin
Staff writer

Children who wait outside for school buses in the morning are at greater risk of being bitten by mosquitoes infected with Eastern equine encephalitis or West Nile virus, said Wayne Raynor, Cumberland County's health director.

"Mosquitoes are active at that time," Raynor said. "I would suggest parents provide children with a light jacket or long-sleeved shirt, something they can take off as the temperature heats up."

Raynor said parents should consider driving their children to the bus stop and letting them wait in the car.

The wet weather this summer has allowed the mosquito population to boom, increasing concerns about mosquito-borne illnesses. Mosquitoes are most active in the morning and evening.

Eastern equine encephalitis and West Nile virus are potentially fatal viruses spread to humans through the bite of an infected mosquito.

A Scotland County child who tested positive Friday for Eastern equine encephalitis is still in critical condition, said Debbie Crane, spokeswoman for the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services.

Scotland County Health Director Jane Murray said the child's family has asked that no information about the child be released, including the child's name, age and gender. The child is the first person in North Carolina to get the virus this year.

Disease death

Two people in the central part of the state have contracted West Nile virus this year. The second, an elderly man, died from the disease Aug. 11.

Raynor said the Eastern equine encephalitis case in Scotland County is tragic but he hopes people will be more aware of the mosquito threat now.

The Cumberland County school system has posted information about preventing mosquito bites but has not specifically warned parents about the threat to children who wait outside for school busses, according to the school system's communication office.

Bill Smith, the health director for Robeson County, said he did not know if Robeson County children had been warned about the danger posed by mosquitoes in the mornings.

Ten horses in Robeson County have tested positive for Eastern equine encephalitis this year, more than any other county in the state.

Smith said many children are now being sprayed with bug repellent before athletic practices, and fans are taking repellent with them to Friday night football games, leading him to believe that many parents are aware of the threat.

He said the horses and mosquitoes testing positive for Eastern equine encephalitis have all been found in the northern or western parts of Robeson County, in the St. Pauls, Parkton and Maxton areas.

"But you can't assume the mosquitoes just stop at exit 31," Smith said. "It's countywide.

Efforts ignored

Debbie Hobbs, the interim health director for Harnett County, said her department has sent informational releases to schools to warn children and parents about mosquitoes.

Hobbs worried that the efforts were being ignored.

"We have tried so hard to get the word out, but I do not see a response any different this year than last year," she said. "I don't know what it's going to take. You'd think a case of Eastern equine in the state would be enough."

Raynor said he would like to think people in Cumberland County are taking the threat seriously. "If not, they really need to," he said.

Physicians in the emergency departments at Southeastern Regional Medical Center in Lumberton, Scotland Memorial Hospital in Laurinburg and Cape Fear Valley Health System in Fayetteville all receive regular updates on symptoms of the viruses from local health departments and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, officials at each of the hospitals said.

Can be fatal

Eastern equine encephalitis is a viral illness that attacks the central nervous system. It causes inflammation of the brain and can be fatal to animals and humans.

Survivors may suffer long- term damage to the nervous system.

Symptoms can develop from within a few days to two weeks after a person is bitten by an infected mosquito. The symptoms resemble the flu and include fever and headache.

The symptoms of West Nile virus include fever, headache, body aches, nausea, vomiting and sometimes swollen lymph glands.

There is no human vaccine for Eastern equine encephalitis or West Nile virus, although a vaccine does exist for animals.

The best way to avoid either virus is to prevent mosquito bites.

"We just need to all be conscious of it and do what we can do personally," Hobbs said. "That's the best thing any of us can do."

Staff writer Rebekah Sanderlin can be reached at sanderlinr@fayettevillenc.com or 323-4848, extension 372.