

West Nile makes County appearance

Squirrel tests positive for virus; mosquito carriers said likely

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Inside Bay Area

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A squirrel found in San Mateo County earlier this month tested positive for West Nile virus, a likely sign that infected mosquitoes with the potential to bite humans are among us again, the San Mateo County Mosquito Abatement District said Wednesday.

The squirrel's diagnosis marks the first detection of West Nile virus in the county this year. The virus has been detected in the county since 2004.

According to Dr. Alvaro Garza, San Mateo County's deputy health officer, there is no evidence that people can be infected with West Nile virus by being close to squirrels.

"However," Garza said in a statement, "the presence of infected squirrels means that there likely are infected mosquitoes nearby, which increases the chances that human cases may appear in San Mateo County."

The squirrel, an Eastern Grey, was picked up by the Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo. Displaying symptoms of neurological dysfunction, it was euthanized and sent by the abatement district on July 9 for testing to the University of California, Davis, Center for Vectorborne Diseases.

"Now that we've found this squirrel, we're going to go and set traps to collect adult mosquitoes around where we found the squirrel," said Lauren Marcus, an assistant vector ecologist for the abatement district. "We'll test them for West Nile virus." To date, according to the state's West Nile Virus Web site, 35 counties in California have reported virus activity, with 25 human cases in four counties. Kern County has the vast majority of the human cases and has reported one disease-related death this year. Last year in California, there were 278 cases of the virus in humans, and seven people died.

According to Marcus, 38 creatures — 33 birds and five squirrels — have tested positive for West Nile in San Mateo County since 2004.

Marcus said the district takes a preventive, "multipronged attack" against mosquitoes who are likely virus carriers. In the summer, the district ramps up its abatement in storm drain catch basins and targets larvae and pupae.

"We try to get as much control as possible so the mosquitoes don't become adults, and therefore don't cause disease," she said.

The virus is passed by infected mosquitoes to birds, humans, horses and other animals. Birds, especially crows, are highly susceptible to the virus, according to the abatement district. Vaccinations are available for horses.

Virus symptoms in humans include high fever, severe headache and stiff neck.

Residents can reduce their risk of mosquito-borne diseases such as West Nile Virus by taking precautions recommended by the abatement district:

- Drain standing water around the house weekly in tires, cans, flowerpots, clogged rain gutters, rain barrels, toys and puddles.
- Take precautions to prevent mosquito bites when outdoors at dawn and dusk, the times of day mosquitoes are most active.
- Use insect repellents that contain DEET.
- Dress in long sleeves and pants during dusk or dawn or in areas where mosquitoes are active.
- Replace damaged or missing screens on windows and doors.

If you notice a significant mosquito problem in the county, call the abatement district at (650) 344-8592 or visit <http://www.smcmad.org>. Residents also are encouraged to report dead birds and squirrels online at <http://www.westnile.ca.gov> or by calling (877) WNV-BIRD.

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