

## **Health care professionals: Don't fear West Nile Virus**

*Oquawka* – West Nile Virus first appeared in the United States in 1999, and in less than a decade it has become feared across the country. Local health care professionals say there is no need to hide indoors this the summer, though. Only two human cases of West Nile virus have been diagnosed in Henderson, Warren, and McDonough Counties in the past three years.

“West Nile virus has gotten a lot of attention over the past few years, which has created a bit of fear among the general public,” noted Bob Potter, PA-C with Eagle View Community Health System. “But the reality is that the statewide number of diagnosed cases has actually been dropping quite dramatically.”

Statistics prove Potter's point. In Illinois, the number of West Nile Virus cases in humans has been dropped from 252 in 2005 to 215 in 2006, then all the way to 101 in 2007.

Potter and other health care professionals naturally want this trend to continue. Since West Nile Virus is spread primarily through the bite of infected mosquitoes, the best way to avoid getting the disease is to avoid being bitten.

To avoid mosquito bites, experts recommend using an EPA-registered insect repellent and wearing long sleeves and pants when heading outdoors, especially at dawn and dusk when mosquitoes are most active.

Area residents should also have good screens (free of holes) on their doors and windows to keep mosquitoes outside. Mosquito breeding sites can be eliminated by emptying standing water from flowerpots, buckets and barrels and changing water in pet dishes and bird baths frequently. Tire swings should have a hole in the bottom to let water drain out, and children's wading pools should be empty when not in use.

There is no reason to panic if a mosquito bites you. Only about one in 150 people who

contract the virus will develop West Nile encephalitis or meningitis, while 20 percent of infected persons may experience fever, head and body aches, nausea, vomiting, swollen lymph glands or a skin rash on the chest, stomach, or back. The elderly and those with weakened immune systems are at the greatest risk.

The good news is that approximately 80 percent of people who contract West Nile Virus will experience no ill effects whatsoever.

Animals are also susceptible to the West Nile Virus, most notably birds and horses. If you find a dead bird, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warns against handling the animal with your bare hands. Instead, contact the local health department for instructions on reporting and disposing of the body.