

Mosquito Control: Your pets, farm animals are potential mosquito-borne disease victims

By **JEFFREY STIVERS**, special to the Daily News
May 29, 2004

Mosquito season has arrived, once again, in Naples. That means it is time for residents to begin thinking about protecting themselves, and their pets, from mosquitoes and the diseases that they transmit.

With two human cases of West Nile virus in the county last year, most residents should be aware of the risk of contracting this disease and how to protect themselves. But, how many people think of West Nile virus, or other mosquito-borne diseases, as a threat to their pets or domestic animals?

West Nile virus is a concern mainly for horses and birds. Horses are readily infected and often have a high exposure risk since they are frequently kept in pastures where mosquito numbers can be high.

For infected horses the fatality rate is about 40 percent. Fortunately, there is a vaccine for horses that appears to be highly effective. Horse owners should consult with their veterinarian about having their horses vaccinated.

For birds, the issue is not nearly so clear-cut. For some birds, especially crows and jays, there is a high fatality rate after infection with West Nile virus. For other birds, contracting West Nile virus does not seem to have any impact on the bird's health. Chickens fall into this group and are therefore used as sentinel birds by most of the counties in Florida.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) web site has an extensive listing of dead birds found to be infected with West Nile virus. Bird fanciers might want to visit www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/birdspecies.htm to see if their birds are listed. Be aware, however, that this list is not complete; just because a particular bird species is not listed does not mean that it is immune to West Nile virus.

Unfortunately, there is no vaccine for birds. However, some veterinarians have been vaccinating birds with the horse vaccine, even though it has not been approved or tested for that use.

Anyone having high-value birds might want to consult with their veterinarian about vaccination. Dogs, cats and even young alligators have been infected with West Nile virus. In most cases the best way to prevent infection is to protect animals from being bitten by mosquitoes. Keeping animals indoors or inside well screened enclosures is the

best way to avoid that. Where this is not possible, using a large fan to create a strong breeze can reduce the number of mosquitoes able to feed on the animal.

Eastern equine encephalitis (EEE) is another mosquito-borne disease of importance to horse owners. This is another disease carried by birds that is transmitted to humans and horses by mosquitoes. In horses and humans alike, EEE is frequently fatal. As with West Nile virus, there is an effective vaccine for horses against EEE. There is no vaccine for humans, however.

Dog heartworm is another prominent mosquito-borne disease in Naples. While heartworm is primarily a problem in dogs, cats and humans can become infected, although much less frequently than dogs.

There are effective preventative and curative treatments for heartworm. Dog and cat owners should consult with their veterinarians before beginning any treatment of their pets. There can be serious side effects using preventative drugs to treat an animal already infected with heartworm.

These are some of the major diseases transmitted by mosquitoes to pets and domestic animals in the Naples area. Just the nuisance impact of mosquitoes on animals can be high. Beside the obvious impact of blood loss as a result of possibly hundreds of thousands of mosquito bites every day, there are other, less obvious, problems. There are well documented cases in the literature of cattle actually being killed by mosquitoes including at least one occurrence in Collier County. The mosquitoes were so thick that several cattle actually suffocated when their nostrils and throats became clogged with mosquitoes.



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