Health Department Responds to Anthrax Scare

A State Public Health Lab report indicating a presumptive positive test for anthrax on a suspicious letter received by the Microsoft Corporation propelled the local Health Department staff into action on Friday, October 12.

Within hours the Health Department staff was onsite at Microsoft, taking nasal swabs from the employees for culture to determine possible exposure to the disease and potential illness. The staff also informed the employees about what symptoms to watch for and reassured them about the low risk of contracting the disease. A hotline was set up immediately to respond to public calls.

Although the subsequent confirmatory testing of the letter completed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta turned out to be negative for anthrax, other damage had already been done in the Truckee Meadows community. A high level of public fear was generated by this event, which followed several anthrax-related deaths from mail on the East Coast. The Health Department received hundreds of calls from citizens requesting pick up of postal items for testing. Even a month after the incident, two to four full-time staff members continued to respond to daily public requests for service surrounding the event.

The Vector-borne Diseases Program staff responded to a request from the United States Post Office on Vassar Street to provide information to anxious employees. Within one week staff spoke to over three hundred employees in small, highly-interactive groups to ensure that all questions were answered.

Help Wanted: Public Service Interns

Able, willing college students needed to work in the Vector-borne Diseases Program during the summer of 2002. College credit may be earned through the University of Nevada Biology Dept. Work experience gained is particularly applicable to majors in biological or health sciences. Duties include field and lab work associated with mosquito control activities. For additional information, please call 785-4599.
West Nile Virus Spreads Westward Through the US

West Nile (WN) virus is a mosquito-borne disease which causes encephalitis in horses, humans, and birds. It has been shown to be fatal to some humans and horses. Fatalities seem to occur mostly with older or debilitated individuals. The disease can also leave a human or animal neurologically impaired for life.

The disease first appeared in the United States in New York in 1999. In 2000, the disease rapidly spread to adjoining areas and down the East Coast at an unpredictable speed. In 2001 it continued to jump to new states and Canada faster than anyone could have predicted. Due to intermingling of bird species along migratory pathways, there is a possibility that WN virus could find its way to Washoe County.

This means that surveillance for the disease has taken on increased importance. That’s why the Vector-borne Disease Program staff is participating in a proactive, statewide surveillance project for WN virus.

In cooperation with a group of local, state, and federal agencies, the staff takes blood samples from wild birds and horses. To date all samples from the animals tested have been negative for WN virus.

Several species of mosquitoes thought to be involved in the transmission of WN virus are found in Washoe County. Therefore, continued control to reduce mosquito numbers is the best method of prevention for WN virus in humans.

Lyme Disease: How Common is it in Washoe County?

Last summer a local newspaper reported that a person had gotten sick with Lyme disease in Washoe County. The Health Department has investigated and been unable to confirm this report.

Only five cases of confirmed Lyme disease have been reported in Washoe County since 1991. However, the Health Department has not been able to verify that these were acquired in the County.

The Vector-borne Disease Program has done surveillance for the species of tick that transmits Lyme disease, but has never found it. The Program staff intends to do further surveillance in the coming year to determine if the tick has a presence in Washoe County.

In the West Lyme disease is caused by a bacterium that is carried by the Western black-legged tick, Ixodes Pacificus. These ticks are smaller than common dog and cattle ticks. In their larval and nymphal stages, they are no bigger than a pinhead; the adult ticks are slightly larger. Nymphal and adult ticks can transmit the Lyme disease bacterium to humans.

Ixodes ticks search for host animals from leaf litter on the forest floor, or the tips of grasses and shrubs. They crawl onto animals and humans and feed on blood by inserting their mouth parts (not their whole bodies) into the skin. Ticks found on a person’s scalp probably have crawled there from lower parts of the body.

Ixodes ticks are typically found on the Western slopes of the Sierras in Northern California. Campers or hikers who visit forested and grassy places there may be exposed to infected ticks. Dogs can carry the infected ticks back into homes where their owners live. Dogs can become infected with the Lyme disease bacteria and develop arthritis.

The Vector-borne Disease Program will test embedded ticks from people and their pets to determine possible exposure to Lyme disease. By identifying the bacteria that cause this disease, a person can seek early antibiotic treatment.

This helicopter view taken last August during the driest summer month shows considerable irrigated wet area in Spanish Springs where mosquitoes breed.

Staff from various public agencies cooperate in waterfowl roundup to take blood samples for WN virus testing.

Vector-borne Diseases Program staff use a flagging method to do surveillance for live ticks.