

COUNTY PUTS FOCUS ON MOSQUITO CONTROL.

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Vector control crews stepped up their efforts Tuesday to find mosquito breeding sources in the Northridge neighborhood where health officials confirmed a 91-year-old woman had died from West Nile virus.

The Greater Los Angeles Vector Control District set out additional traps for the disease-carrying insects and increased inspections of gutters, catch basins, flood control channels and other public sources of standing water where mosquitoes can breed.

They also went door-to-door and encouraged residents to eliminate puddles and stagnant pools in their own yards.

"We want people to go into their back yards and make sure they don't have any standing water," said Stephanie Miladin, spokeswoman for the district.

The increased surveillance follows the death last Thursday of Hester Martin, a 91-year-old cancer survivor who fell ill after being bitten by a mosquito during a backyard party on July 22.

She is among four confirmed West Nile virus deaths in California. There are 32 known cases in Los Angeles County and 109 cases in the state.

Vector control officials have found infected mosquitoes at Chatsworth Reservoir, near the Tillman Wastewater Treatment Plant in Sepulveda Basin, at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center near Burbank, in Granada Hills and North Hills.

County officials have stopped counting dead birds but figure they number in the thousands, marking another key indicator of the virus' progression. And county veterinarians are investigating an increase in dead tree squirrels in the San Fernando Valley. Necropsies on two gray squirrels collected in Northridge confirmed West Nile virus and officials hope to test a dead fox squirrel picked up at Balboa Park.

Dead squirrels "would give you an indication you have infected mosquitoes right there on your property," said Los Angeles County Senior Veterinarian Karen Ehnert.

With virus cases and public concern mounting, city officials said they are trying to reduce persistent puddling in areas with historic drainage problems by boring holes through the cement to allow water to seep into the soil, grinding down raised asphalt patches and repaving bumpy streets that collect water when residents overwater their lawns or hose down sidewalks.

Street Services Director Bill Robertson said the department has received 651 calls since January complaining of standing water or potential mosquito breeding pools. They have made temporary fixes at 2,700 locations.

“If you were to fix every location in the city with raised gutters or eroded gutters, it would cost excess of \$14 million,” Robertson said. “Really, we’re tackling this as fast as we can with our resources.”

Councilwomen Janice Hahn and Wendy Greuel introduced a motion Tuesday directing city employees to report standing pools of water and place a priority on clearing them.

“We know we’re not going to be able to repair every single street corner where there is drainage problems,” Greuel said.

The Vector Control District has a team of more than 20 workers who spray pesticides in waterlogged gutters on a weekly basis. “We’re in the business of controlling mosquitoes, not eradicating mosquitoes,” Miladin said. “You’re never going to eradicate mosquitoes, and that’s a proven fact.”

That’s why prevention is so important, especially for people with weakened immune systems, such as the elderly and those with hypertension or renal disease. Only 1 percent of people bitten by an infected mosquito develop the serious effects, which can include brain infection, confusion, dementia and paralysis.

About 80 percent of people bitten by infected mosquitoes suffer no symptoms and the remaining 19 percent suffer flulike symptoms that can last several weeks and often go undiagnosed. People should be on the lookout for a high fever, malaise, weakness and a headache, said Kaiser Permanente infectious disease specialist Dr. Stanley Shapiro.

Kaiser’s Southern California medical centers have conducted 744 tests for West Nile virus in patients showing those symptoms, and only 69 turned up positive.

“It’s important to remember the chances of becoming severely ill from any one mosquito bite are very small,” Shapiro said, adding that the elderly and young are much more likely to suffer serious illness or death from the flu.

--To report dead birds, call the state's hotline at (877) 968-2473 or visit www.westnile.ca.gov.

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WEST NILE HAZARD

SOURCE: Daily News research
