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THREE VOLUSIA COUNTY CHICKENS TEST POSITIVE FOR EASTERN EQUINE ENCEPHALITIS

Three chickens in Volusia County have tested positive for Eastern equine encephalitis (EEE), according to Jonas Stewart, mosquito control director for Volusia County.

EEE is a mosquito-borne viral disease and the most serious form of encephalitis in North America. As the name suggests, it afflicts horses, but it also can affect humans and some species of birds.

"Mosquito numbers are low right now," Stewart noted. "We likely will see more positive chickens when rain increases. I think people are complacent now, thinking they can sit outside in the cool morning and evening air with little chance of disease-carrying mosquitoes biting them."

Forty-eight "sentinel chickens" are placed in coops in 16 locations in or near all Volusia County cities. Staff members from the Mosquito Control division check their blood each week for a number of mosquito-borne diseases including EEE, Saint Louis encephalitis and West Nile virus. The chickens don't die from the diseases, but they do develop antibodies within 10 days of being bitten by an infected mosquito. These antibodies can be detected with a simple blood test.

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EEE is transmitted to humans through the bite of an infected mosquito, and it usually takes three to 10 days to develop symptoms after being bitten. Symptoms include sudden fever, headache, vomiting, unusual visual sensitivity to light, stiff neck and back, confusion, drowsiness, clumsiness, difficulty walking, and irritability. The disease sometimes can damage nerves and has up to a 50 percent mortality rate.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, there were 182 confirmed cases of human EEE in the United States between 1964 and 2000. Florida reported the most cases, 53, followed by Georgia with 22 and Massachusetts with 21.

The most recent human cases in Volusia County occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when three people were infected with EEE and one died.

Those at highest risk for developing EEE include people who work outdoors, take part in outdoor recreational activities, and are over 50 or under 15. Although there is an equine vaccine for EEE, there is no vaccine for humans.

Some cases of EEE infections in horses are fatal, but they are not a significant risk factor for human infection because horses are considered a “dead end” host for the virus. Horse owners are advised to contact their veterinarian for EEE and West Nile vaccinations.

Tips on mosquito prevention

Florida’s Department of Health advises the public to remain diligent in their personal mosquito-protection efforts. These should include the “five D’s” for prevention:

- Dusk and dawn – Avoid being outdoors during dusk and dawn, when mosquitoes are seeking blood.
- Dress – Wear clothing that covers the skin.
- DEET – When the potential exists for exposure to mosquitoes, repellants containing DEET are recommended. Products with concentrations of up to 30 percent DEET generally are recommended for most situations. It is not recommended to use DEET on children under two months old. Infants should be kept indoors or mosquito netting should be used over carriers when mosquitoes are present. If additional protection is necessary, apply a permethrin repellent directly to your clothing. Always read the manufacturer's directions carefully before you put on a repellent.
- Drainage – Check your home to rid it of standing water in which mosquitoes can lay their eggs. Elimination of breeding sites is one of the keys to prevention.

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To eliminate mosquito-breeding sites, Stewart offers these suggestions:

- Clean out eaves, troughs and gutters.
- Remove old tires or drill holes in those used in playgrounds to drain.
- Turn over or remove empty plastic pots and buckets.
- Pick up all beverage containers and cups.
- Check tarps on boats or other equipment that may collect water.
- Pump out bilges on boats.
- Replace water in birdbaths and animal-feeding dishes at least once a week.
- Change water in plant trays, including hanging plants, at least once a week.

For more information, contact Stewart at (386) 212-7181 or jstewart@co.volusia.fl.us.

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