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Second case of Nile virus is reported

Spread to S. Florida inevitable, state says

BY ELAINE DE VALLE
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West Nile virus, the mosquito-borne brain-swelling illness, has struck again.

The state's Department of Health said Thursday that a second West Nile virus encephalitis case -- involving a 64-year-old woman officials did not identify -- has been confirmed. The woman is from Madison County, site of the first reported case, that of 73-year-old Seymore Carruthers. Carruthers is recovering.

The woman remained hospitalized Thursday.

Meanwhile, scientists trying to protect people against the potentially lethal West Nile virus say they are a step closer to knowing exactly what they are up against.

CARRIERS IDENTIFIED

Officials have identified three species of mosquitoes that are carrying the virus, a break in the battle against the disease, which is new to Florida this year.

While experts don't know which species are able to transmit West Nile to humans, identifying the three mosquito species carrying the disease can help greatly in fighting it because different insects have different breeding habits.

"They can then target those breeding areas for mosquito control," state epidemiologist Carina Blackmore said

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Thursday.

Following the detection of another mosquito-borne virus, eastern equine encephalitis, in Escambia County and neighboring Alabama, a medical alert in 28 of Florida's 67 counties was extended to include Escambia.

The alert is now in effect for 29 North Florida counties where one or both of the viruses have been detected in an animal: Baker, Bay, Bradford, Calhoun, Clay, Columbia, Duval, Escambia, Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, Hamilton, Holmes, Jackson, Jefferson, Lafayette, Leon, Liberty, Madison, Nassau, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, St. Johns, Suwannee, Taylor, Union, Wakulla, Walton and Washington.

SPREAD INEVITABLE

But it is only a matter of time, doctors say, before Broward, Monroe and Miami-Dade are added to the list.

"It's not staying in one place. We know that for sure," said Steve Wiersma, a state epidemiologist. "And we're also very confident that it will move south into Central and South Florida."

"There's really nothing to stop it. The ecology is there. The birds are there. The mosquitoes are there," he said. "As far as when it moves, we don't really know. It could be this year, and it could be early next year."

But Wiersma said people should not panic.

"It's still a very rare disease, no matter how you look at it," he said, pointing out that only nine people in two years -- seven in 1999 and two in 2000 -- have died from the disease in the New York area.

"Compared to the population of the New York City area, nine is not a lot," Wiersma said.

This story was supplemented by a report from the Associated Press.



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