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## Ticks, mosquitoes spawn emerging diseases in TN

Health officials hope to avoid repeat of 2012

By Tom Wilemon  
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State health officials want to get a head start this year on diseases caused by ticks and mosquitoes to prevent a repeat of 2012.

West Nile infections in humans rose 83 percent last year, while Rocky Mountain spotted fever infections increased 162 percent. The Tennessee Department of Health is asking state residents to help the agency prevent and monitor illnesses this season through efforts ranging from removing mosquito habitats around the yard to reporting dead birds, which can be harbingers of West Nile.

The warm-weather pests are more dangerous than they used to be, said Abelardo C. Moncayo, director of the vector-borne disease section for the Tennessee Department of Health.

"West Nile is really new," Moncayo said. "It just came about this century. Rocky Mountain spotted fever is relatively new. Obviously, it wasn't discovered here. But now we have it here. La Crosse encephalitis wasn't here originally. All these are emerging diseases. We as parents grew up in an age when we didn't have to worry about these things."

A child in East Tennessee died from La Crosse encephalitis last year, while a Davidson County man <http://www.tennessean.com/apps/pbcs.dll/artikkel?NoCache=1&Dato=20121010&Kategori=NEWS01&Lopenr=130505004&Ref=AR> alt="" title="" target="\_blank">died from West Nile — both mosquito-borne illnesses.

So far, tick-borne diseases don't seem to be as prevalent this year as last. Sixteen cases of Rocky Mountain spotted fever have been reported in Tennessee year-to-date, compared with 50 at this point last year. Cases of Lyme disease are also on the decline, with two this year compared with six last year. Cases of ehrlichiosis are running even with last year.

But colder, wetter weather this spring could be the reason because people aren't spending as much time outdoors. Tick season is just getting underway.

Norma Engelhardt of Nashville, a volunteer with the <http://www.tn-lyme.org/> alt="" title="" target="\_blank">Middle Tennessee Lyme Disease Network, said identifying early symptoms is critical with tick-borne diseases because many times people don't know they've been bitten. Antibiotics can cure these diseases if diagnosed soon enough.

"My daughter would have been diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis if we had not known about Lyme disease," Engelhardt said.

## Report dead birds

Health officials are particularly worried about West Nile disease, which is carried by the common house mosquito. The Metro Public Health Department had scheduled backyard inspections and an informational campaign for Saturday in Goodlettsville, but the event was postponed until May 25

because of heavy rains.

The wet spring is a nurturing climate for broods of mosquitoes.

Tennesseans can find out if the mosquitoes in their neighborhoods are carrying the disease by reporting dead crows and bluejays — two bird species prone to die from infections.

The virus can strike in different neighborhoods every year, Moncayo said. When West Nile was a new disease for Tennessee in 2002, the state health department received a multitude of dead bird samples to test for the virus.

“Now, I think people have gotten kind of used to it,” he said. “But we are all coming off a big outbreak last year. It’s important this year for people to be calling their health departments to submit crows and bluejays for testing. It’s best not to handle any dead animals with your bare hands. The best thing you can do is call the local health department and coordinate with them how they can come out, or how the bird can be taken to them, to get a sample.”

La Crosse encephalitis is carried by the tree-hole mosquito.

“It was sort of a Midwestern disease,” Moncayo said. “Now it has moved to the Appalachians, including the eastern part of Tennessee. It can affect children mainly.”

Tick-borne diseases are also causing heartaches for pet owners. Brandy Reed of Bellevue lost a cat to bobcat fever last year, then last month had a kitten come down with the disease, which veterinarians call cytauxzoon felis. The kitten survived, she said, after treatment with medicine.

Sharon Patton, professor of parasitology at the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine, said the disease has a high mortality rate. The best ways to prevent it are to keep cats indoors and regularly use an effective tick control product.

But it’s not tick diseases with strange new names that are killing the most pets. It’s heartworms, which are carried by mosquitoes.

“So many animals still get heartworms every year,” Patton said. “So many people allow their animals to get it. That’s sort of sad when it can be prevented.”

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