

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Summer Mosquitoes

Mosquitoes! What an unpleasant part of summer accompanies their return to our neighborhoods. Homeowners often call on government to remove the nuisance insect through town wide spraying. This year, however, West Nile Virus, a new concern among some townspeople, accompanies the return of mosquitoes. That mosquito-borne disease was unknown in the United States until last year, when it was identified in New York.

Callers to my office have voiced their concern, prompting me to do some research about mosquitoes and their threat to public health. The result of that research forms the topic of today's Byline.

The simple summary is this: Massachusetts mosquito bites will make you itch, but there is no evidence that they will make you sick. The full explanation follows.

West Nile Virus was first diagnosed in North America last year. It is a non-communicable disease spread by a specific genus of mosquito, the Culex. Ordinary mosquitoes are the Aedes. genus that does not carry the virus. And insect control measures that target ordinary mosquitoes do not control the disease-carrying Culex.

Public health departments throughout the Northeast are monitoring the region for signs of the disease. In Massachusetts that monitoring targets these three known risks; breeding grounds, birds and bugs.

The breeding grounds preferred by the Culex mosquito are urban storm drains, catch basins, sewage lines, and other enclosed spaces, so water from such places is collected, sent to Boston, and examined for the suspect larvae. None have been found.

Birds can be infected and pass the infection to Culex mosquitoes; so dead birds are sent to state labs for examination. Neither Massachusetts nor Connecticut has found any trace of infection in birds, though three dead crows were recently found to be infected in New York.

The "bug" analysis means examination of adult mosquitoes. If any sign of infection is found in tested larvae, adult mosquitoes will be trapped at various locations throughout the state. That testing has not yet been necessary.

No traces of infection have been found in Massachusetts, but public health officials are prepared to act if the virus should be discovered. The public would be alerted, just as we were recently notified of the birds found in New York. The federal approval necessary for aerial spraying of Malathion might be sought. Larvacides would be applied to breeding grounds.

We would all be well advised to take protective measures such as keeping our skin covered and applying insect repellents to exposed skin. In other words, we would use the same methods we now use to prevent mosquito bites.

I was surprised to learn there is not much we can do, but heartened to find out that local, state, and federal public health officials have been working to protect the public since the first case of West Nile Virus was discovered.