Fall isn’t time for complacency about mosquito illnesses

PRESS EDITORIAL

The cooler days of early fall bring relief not just from sweating during outdoor activity, they also reduce the number of biting insects.

But the weather will have to get much colder for mosquitoes to stop flying and feeding on the blood of mammals, and that means the risk of the diseases they carry will remain for a while.

One of the worst and thankfully rarest, Eastern equine encephalitis, turned up in two South Jersey horses right as fall approached.

A Cumberland County horse died at the end of August from the state’s first case of the viral disease this year. Then in mid-September, an Atlantic County horse was diagnosed with the disease, which causes brain inflammation.

Neither horse was vaccinated against the disease. Vaccination is important not only to save the lives of horses, but also to limit the spread of equine encephalitis, which can also infect people and result in death when it does.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention gets reports of 12 to 17 cases of people with equine encephalitis each year. About a third of those develop the full infection, and of those, 90 percent die, with those over age 55 and younger than 15 most vulnerable.

Atlantic County sprayed to control adult mosquitoes in Hamilton Township as this month began after some were found to carry Eastern equine and also the virus causing West Nile disease. That followed spraying the week before in the Hammonton area.

West Nile virus is by far the more prevalent of the two diseases, and fortunately far less lethal. No human cases of West Nile were reported in New Jersey last year, but this year so far four people have been infected, none fatally.

Mosquitoes bearing West Nile have been found in all New Jersey counties. The CDC says that four out of five who are infected have no symptoms, while the remainder typically have mild symptoms such as fever and head and body aches, often with skin rash and swollen lymph glands.

But in a small number of people, fewer than 1 percent, West Nile becomes more severe, possibly leading to convulsions, paralysis, coma and even death.

In 2015, the virus claimed victims in Passaic and Monmouth counties, according to N.J. Department of Health. Two years earlier, a Gloucester County woman and a Morris County man died from West Nile.

The virus started spreading in the United States in the 1990s, reaching peaks of 284 fatalities in 2002 and 9,862 cases in 2003, according to the CDC. By last year, both numbers were much reduced, with 2,038 cases resulting in 94 deaths.
The risk may be small, but preventative measures are relatively easy. County mosquito commissions do the heavy lifting, but homeowners play a significant part by ensuring their properties aren’t breeding habitats for mosquitoes.

During mosquito season from early summer through fall, homeowners should look around their properties occasionally to make sure there’s no standing water … either due to poor drainage or more commonly from flower pots, trash receptacles and such that gather rainfall.

Another frequent breeding ground is gutters clogged with leaves or not draining properly. Mosquitoes don’t need much water for their eggs to grow into larvae and then the flying adults.

And typically they don’t fly far in search of their blood meal. So besides lessening the chance of a mosquito-borne disease, these practices can drastically reduce the number of annoying bites a family endures each year.