West Nile victim had ‘risk factors’

Lakeview-area woman identified as rare fatal victim of virus

By Michael Nelson

PINE TOWNSHIP — Last week, the Mid-Michigan District Health Department confirmed a woman died from complications related to the West Nile virus.

Death records from Kent County Clerk’s Office identified the Lakeview-area woman as Fannie Miller, 66, who died on Oct. 19. Miller was an Old Order Amish woman living in Pine Township and contracted the disease in August.

According to records, Miller contracted pneumonia after being infected with West Nile virus. She ultimately died of respiratory failure.

She was treated and died at Spectrum Health Blodgett Hospital in East Grand Rapids.

Miller is survived by her husband, Joe Miller, nine children, 32 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Four cases of West Nile virus, including Miller’s, were reported in Clinton, Gratiot and Montcalm counties, according to the Health Department. This is up from zero cases in 2016.

The virus is spread by mosquitoes and cannot be transmitted from person-to-person or animal-to-animal through casual contact. Additionally, the virus is not transmitted by handling or consuming infected animals.

Marcus Cheatham, health officer with the Health Department, said it is possible for birds to pass the virus through mosquitoes.

“For example, a mosquito can bite a bird with the West Nile virus and then spread it to the next person it bites,” he explained.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 80 percent of people infected with West Nile virus do not develop any symptoms. One in five people who are infected will develop a fever along with a headache, body aches, joint pains, vomiting, diarrhea or rash, and one in 150 infected people will develop a severe illness affecting the central nervous system.

The West Nile virus is not typically lethal, but when older or vulnerable people are infected, death is a possible outcome.

“The person who died, she would have had risk factors that made her vulnerable,” Cheatham noted.

Cheatham and Health Department Public Information Officer Leslie Kimmer say there is no reason for the public panic.

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“Come spring when the mosquito population returns, Kinnee wants people to be thinking about mosquitoes and the dangers they can present besides just an itchy bite. She recommends everyone 6 months old and older use insect repellant. Other preventative measures include wearing protective clothing, repairing holes or gaps in screens and draining standing water.

More information about the West Nile virus, including prevention, can be found at www.cdc.gov/westnile online.

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