

Results of West Nile virus study concern MD

By JASON MISNER
SPECIAL TO THE
BEAVER

The risk of getting seriously ill after contracting West Nile virus is higher than was first thought and has propelled McMaster University researchers to find out why.

An abbreviated version of long-awaited results from a spring blood study, documenting the prevalence of the mosquito-borne West Nile virus in Oakville residents, was released Friday. It showed that one out of 84 cases of West Nile can result in serious illness like encephalitis or meningitis, sometimes requiring hospitalization.

"The prevalence rate is well within the range of normal and that's what we expected," said Dr. Susan Elliott, the dean of social sciences at McMaster who was one of three researchers contracted by the Province to do the \$250,000 study. "But the possibility of getting seriously ill is higher than previously thought. That deserves further investigation."

Previous studies in the United States indicated that one person out of every 150 West Nile cases became seriously ill. It's the first detailed study of its kind in Canada and gives health officials and medical researchers some

insight into the virus and its impact.

McMaster will conduct a study looking at serious West Nile cases in Ontario and Saskatchewan, which was Canada's provincial West Nile hot spot this year, Elliott said. "We are doing our own follow up," she said, noting it would include an evaluation of physical and mental health.

Elliott hopes to have the results compiled and ready for public release early next summer, when the West Nile season typically starts.

The point of the blood study was to find how many residents in two postal code areas in Oakville contracted West Nile. They were chosen because they had the highest rate of infection in North America last year.

Of the 1,505 residents who provided a blood sample, 46 tested positive, or 3.1 per cent, for virus antibodies. It produced a ratio suggesting that between 670 and 1,219 of the 30,467 residents living in the sample areas were infected.

In that area, there were six cases of encephalitis (all hospitalized) and five cases of meningitis (one hospitalized). Eight people also had West Nile fever (one hospitalized).

Generally, the Oakville number of 3.1 per cent was comparable to the number infected in New York at 2.6

per cent.

The Oakville study found most, or 65 per cent, of those testing positive for the antibodies were over 50 years of age. The study also looked at behavioural patterns mainly to see what people did to protect themselves against getting West Nile.

Two-thirds surveyed had containers with water — known mosquito breeding sites — on their properties; a quarter had door and window screen tears; nearly two-thirds rarely or never wore insect repellent outdoors for 30 minutes or longer; half rarely or

never wore long-sleeved shirts and pants. More than half did nothing to prevent themselves from being bitten.

Elliott said she was astonished to see the lack of protection from the public against West Nile. "This is just startling to me," she said.

Dr. Bob Nosal, Halton's Medical Officer of Health, said the report takes into account data from last year not this year, but concludes that residents need to take precautions against West Nile. The entire blood study is to be released to the Province later this week.



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