

Don't mix encephalitis with common flu, says survivor

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

A Markham woman who survived encephalitis wants to ensure York Region residents — and their doctors — don't dismiss the possibility of the sometimes-fatal condition because the symptoms are similar to those of the common flu.

Allison Cava, 33, decided to take her story public after increased press reports this summer about the West Nile virus, one of thousands of viruses that could cause

encephalitis.

"Doctors really need to know what to look for, that's the message. I went far too long without being diagnosed," she said.



ALLISON CAVA
'I went too long without being diagnosed.'

Encephalitis is an acute inflammation of the brain caused by a viral infection. Most people infected with encephalitis have only mild symptoms that don't last long. But serious cases can cause headaches, high fevers, lethargy, convulsions, delirium, coma or death.

It can also cause significant brain impairment includ-

ing loss of memory, lack of muscle coordination or hearing and vision problems.

The West Nile virus, in more serious cases, can cause encephalitis. It's transmitted to humans by mosquitoes who have bitten infected birds. Both birds and mosquitoes infected with West Nile have been found in York Region this summer but

the virus has not been found in humans here — yet.

Five "probable" cases of humans contracting the West Nile virus have been found across the GTA — three in Peel region, one in Halton and the fifth in Toronto.

"Once again I urge Ontarians to continue taking precautions to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes," said

Dr. Colin D'Cunha, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. "While the risk of acquiring West Nile virus is low, one should always take precautionary measures."

Less than one per cent of people with the virus develop serious neurological problems.

Dr. Caroline Geenen, a neurologist at Markham

Stouffville Hospital, said as more birds test positive for the virus, doctors are more aware than ever to watch for symptoms of infectious encephalitis, which include fever, headache, muscle pain, confusion and seizures.

For more information, call the York Region Public Health Department at 1-800-361-5653.

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