

# West Nile shots for horses already in high gear

Three veterinarians protect vital element of region's economy

BY JOAN RANSBERRY  
Staff Writer

York Region's horses are getting needed.

A West Nile virus vaccination program is targeting horses after four in the area tested positive for the potentially fatal disease last year.

With 20,000 horses living on 1,400 properties in York Region, Dr. Peter Weidelich, one of the region's three equine veterinarians, is especially busy.

"So far, I've vaccinated 200 horses and I still have about 200 to do," said Dr. Weidelich of Stouffville's Town and Country Animal Hospital. "I'm telephoning my clients, reminding them of the need to get their horses protected."

West Nile was first identified in the United States four years ago. It's a mosquito-borne virus that causes an inflammation in the brain called encephalitis. Mosquitoes get the virus from birds and pass it on to other birds, humans and other species, including horses.

Joined by equine veterinarians Ralph Watt of Markham and Mike Azjak of Mount Albert, Dr. Weidelich explained the initial vaccination for West Nile requires two injections, three to six weeks apart followed by an annual booster shot.

The vaccination may include a booster every six months for horses that travel to high risk areas, such as the United States, where mosquito populations survive year-round. Also, the stress of travel may compromise some animals' immune systems.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Food is taking a stringent approach to make sure horses are protected. Last year, West Nile was the largest insect-borne epidemic ever recorded in the Western hemisphere, ministry spokesman Dr. Paul Innes said.

Horses with West Nile experience muscle twitches and rapidly become unsteady on their feet. Other signs are difficulty walking, knuckling over, head tilt, inability to stand, circling, overall weakness, paralysis of the limbs and blindness.

Approximately 30 per cent of

horses with the virus die. Three horses in the GTA died of West Nile last year, while the province lost 30 horses, Dr. Weidelich said.

Close to 40 per cent of the horses in the GTA live in York Region, the majority of them in King, East Gwillimbury and Whitchurch-Stouffville.

Keeping York Region's horses healthy is critical to the industry's economy, said Eric Lismanis, Whitchurch-Stouffville's economic development officer.

An average of \$3,300 is spent annually on each horse in York Region — a region-wide expenditure of \$37 million.

York Region's equine industry generates 6,500 full-time jobs, Mr. Lismanis added.

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No cattle, dogs, cats or other species are known to have West Nile at this time, Dr. Innes stressed.

In humans, the virus progresses slowly. "But, in horses, West Nile is fast-acting. There's a rapid onset in horses," Dr. Innes said.

York Region's human population has not escaped West Nile.

Last year, two people in the region tested positive for the virus. A woman who was visiting Thornhill also contracted West Nile. All three recovered at home.

The virus tends to closely follow the migratory patterns of birds. Humans and other animals do not carry enough virus in their blood for it to be transmitted to other animals or humans.

Veterinarians welcome Canadian winters since cold temperatures kill viruses.

While horse farm owners are encouraged to take advantage of vaccinations, they are also reminded to reduce the amount of standing water available for mosquito breeding.

"Eliminate any area where water can pool such as old tires, unused buckets, rain barrels or water troughs," Dr. Innes said. "Horses should be kept indoors or out of cool, shady moist area during dawn and dusk, the peak of mosquito activity times."



FILE PHOTO

Monty gets his West Nile booster shot from veterinarian Peter Weidelich. Stephanie VanDitzhuysen of Stouffville keeps the horse still. York Region vets are busy innoculating horses, which are highly susceptible to the West Nile virus.

## No West Nile threat from ponds, marshes: conservation authorities

Your stormwater pond and neighbourhood marsh aren't trying to kill you, local conservation authorities say.

Both authorities covering York Region's river watersheds have been hearing from callers who want nearby wetlands filled in.

But staff say the mosquito species carrying West Nile virus breed in still water found around homes or in storm sewer catch basins, not natural areas.

They are even sticking up for the mosquito, a part of the food chain for many creatures.

"If you kill them all, you're basically eliminating the food source," said Mike Walters, environmental services manager of the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority.

The Toronto and Region Conservation Authority adopted a protocol last week to deal with "aggressive requests" from citizens who want something done to stop mosquitos breeding in wetlands and stormwater ponds.

Some callers will be given fact

sheets on the importance of wetlands and about West Nile, stating few stormwater ponds are mosquito breeding sites and suggesting they pose "little or no risk to nearby residents".

*"If you kill them all, you're basically eliminating the food source."*

The primary West Nile carrier is the common house mosquito, culex pipiens, which breeds in birdbaths, pool covers, catch basins or other urban spots, where water can sit undisturbed for a week.

Newmarket and King have passed bylaws requiring homeowners to remove standing water. Markham and East Gwillimbury will introduce bylaws by May 12.

In areas where the virus was found, the regions catch basins will be treated with pellets of

methoprene, a larvicide.

Georgina Mayor Jeff Holec has said canals and some stormwater ponds in Keswick will also be treated with larvicide "because the water is so low right now".

Some callers have asked Mr. Walters if they should cover their back yard ponds.

He has suggested installing fountains or devices to aerate the water, stocking ponds with mosquito-eating minnows or installing bird houses or bat houses nearby.

Durham Region will monitor its stormwater ponds this year to see if they harbour mosquitos with the virus, he said.

Meanwhile, the TRCA will monitor natural areas and help check for evidence methoprene seeding harms species other than mosquitos.

The LSRCA is expected to set its own West Nile policies later this month.

— Mike Adler with files from John Stykhuis

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