

Fall 2002 Comstock Health Chronicle

West Nile Virus

Without a doubt, the West Nile virus (WNV) is a hot topic in both human and equine medicine. The recent human deaths from WNV has brought the disease into the spotlight across the country.

The WNV causes encephalitis in birds, humans, and horses. It is carried by birds (reservoir host) and passed to other birds, humans, and horses by mosquitoes. Humans and horses CANNOT transmit the disease, as the virus does not reach contagious levels in their bodies. West Nile virus has spread across the east and south following bird migratory patterns. It has reached as far west as Texas and is anticipated to reach the west coast within the next 3 years. There is concern that California may be exposed earlier as many species of birds migrate from Texas along the southwest coast and into California.

Since 1999, over 800 horses have contracted WNV with a 33-50% fatality rate. The disease causes neurologic signs including depression, incoordination, trembling, hypersensitivity, and in the end stages, recumbency.

A vaccine is available to protect horses against WNV. The vaccine has been shown to be reasonably effective in preventing the disease. Current vaccination recommendations for first-time vaccination are two injections three to six weeks apart. Boosters are recommended every four to six months in areas with a long mosquito season. Because no vaccine is 100% effective, mosquito control and minimizing exposure to mosquitoes are important measures in preventing this disease. Mosquito control is also critical for humans as no vaccine against WNV is available for people, or is likely to be available in the near future.

Many of our clients have elected to vaccinate their horses against WNV this year. While WNV has not been seen in our state, how rapidly it will reach our area is difficult to predict, making vaccination at this time the safest approach. We strongly recommend the vaccine to any horses that will be traveling to Texas or the east coast. In addition, because of the migration pattern of birds from Texas to California, we also recommend vaccination of all horses that will be traveling to California. Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or would like to schedule vaccination.