Doctors seek West Nile patterns

BATON ROUGE (AP) — While doctors track human cases of West Nile virus, scientists who study birds, beasts and bugs are looking for patterns in the virus' movement across the state and country.

Animal researchers and entomologists want to find a weak link that can be used to attack the mosquitoes carrying the virus. “We can suppress, but we will never eradicate,” LSU Agriculture Center researcher Michael Perich said Tuesday.

Louisiana’s outbreak is the second largest in the nation. The largest, in New York in 1999, affected more than 60 patients. Louisiana is up to 32 confirmed cases, with more expected. Officials are trying to determine whether two deaths have been caused by the virus.

Last year, a homeless man from Kenner was the only person in Louisiana to come down with West Nile encephalitis. “Bunches” of possible cases are waiting for test results, Dr. Raoult Ratard, the state epidemiologist, said earlier this week.

The Louisiana outbreak began a month earlier than any since the first U.S. cases in 1999. Louisiana is among 33 states where the virus has spread, and health officials believe it will reach California this year or next.

“We want people to be alert... but this is not the bubonic plague or the scourge of the Western Hemisphere,” Perich said.

For one thing, it’s easily avoided by using bug repellent and making sure there’s no standing water in the yard.

For another, other mosquito-borne encephalitis viruses, St. Louis and Eastern Equine, are far more likely to kill than West Nile.

All can cause encephalitis, or swelling of the brain, and can lead to death or paralysis.

There are horse vaccines, but none for people.

Anywhere from 80 percent to 93 percent of people infected with the virus won’t have any symptoms, and most of the others will have flu-like symptoms.

The LSU School of Veterinary Medicine’s Medical Diagnostic Lab has been a busy place since the outbreak began, analyzing dead birds, blood samples and mosquito pools.

“We have been working very hard in this lab every day to keep up with this. We are getting lots of samples from the various parishes,” lab director Alma Roy said.

Parish sanitarians send in dead blue jays, crows and raptors. Veterinarians send in horse blood. Mosquito control labs send pools of collected mosquitoes and the blood of sentinel chickens, which are kept so their blood can be tested periodically for virus antibodies.

The virus has turned up in blood from sentinel chickens in Baldwin and Glencoe, the towns’ mayors said Wednesday.

Blood taken in June from sentinel chickens in Lafayette had a virus in the family which includes both St. Louis and West Nile encephalitis, officials said Tuesday; it will take another two weeks to know which.

“We are finding a lot of positives and they are everywhere,” Roy said.

About 80 horses have contracted the disease, she said.

Dawn Wesson of the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine said she sees two interesting aspects of the outbreak.

First, the mosquitoes carrying West Nile appear to be split between species that bite primarily in the daytime and primarily at night. So, potential exposure could last across more hours of the day rather than just daytimes or early evenings and night.

The other big question is: Why is the disease breaking out in an area generally running between Baton Rouge and Slidell?

The geographic concentration “could be linked to the ecology or species of birds. That’s one of the things Centers for Disease Control is so interested in,” Wesson said.