Local encephalitis case diagnosed

State officials report two cases of mosquito-born disease found in Louisiana

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LAFAYETTE — Two Louisiana residents, including a Lafayette man, are being treated for the mosquito-borne St. Louis Encephalitis. State epidemiologist Dr. Louise McFarland said three more cases are likely in New Orleans. Encephalitis is a brain inflammation that can be deadly, but is usually not if treated, she added.

Because the early symptoms of the disease sound like a mild case of the flu, "there is the very real possibility that there are other cases both in New Orleans and Lafayette that just haven't been diagnosed," she said.

Early symptoms of the disease include headaches and fever followed by disorientation and coma. The incubation period can last from five to 15 days, and the disease may take four to six weeks to run its course.

"A large number of people may never become ill enough to go to a hospital," McFarland said. "If a person is suffering from these symptoms and they just won't go away, then I would suggest they see their family physician."

The Lafayette man, whose name was not released, was diagnosed with encephalitis while being treated at Charity Hospital in New Orleans. The second patient reported with the disease is a 73-year-old man from Slidell.

Studies of blood taken from the Lafayette man revealed the encephalitis and state officials were contacted, McFarland said. McFarland said that in 1997, two cases of Equine Encephalitis, a strain of encephalitis that is different from the strain reported Thursday, were reported in Opelousas with two additional cases being reported in New Orleans.

St. Louis Encephalitis is a virus that is found naturally in birds — both wild and domesticated fowl. McFarland said once a case has been detected, investigators begin checking chickens for any sign of the virus.

"Birds act as reservoirs for the virus," McFarland said. She explained that a mosquito will bite a bird with the virus and then bite another bird. The virus is transmitted to the new bird and each time it's bitten by a new mosquito carrying the virus, it deposits new strands of the virus so that the bird becomes a reservoir holding colonies of the virus.

For St. Louis Encephalitis, the transmission source is pretty simple — mosquitoes. And, living in South Louisiana, there's not a lot that can be done to prevent exposure to mosquitoes. The best you can hope for, she said, is to protect yourself.

"This isn't a panic situation," McFarland said. "What we want to do is let the public know that this disease is out there and that they should protect themselves from mosquitoes as much as possible."

The best defense, she said, is mosquito repellent and wearing long pants and shirts with long sleeves if walking through wooded areas at dawn, dusk or early evening.

The general belief that the long dry spell Louisiana suffered would control the mosquito population isn't necessarily so, said Dr. Susan Mopper, assistant professor of biology at USL. Mosquito eggs can lay dormant for as long as a year, waiting for enough water to gather so the larvae can hatch and grow into adult mosquitoes.