With the threat of the West Nile virus becoming more prevalent in Osceola County, it is vital that we do everything we can to protect ourselves from the chief carrier of the disease: mosquitoes.

Infected mosquitoes, along with ticks, transmit the West Nile virus from infected birds to humans. Our concern should be protecting ourselves from mosquitoes, the main host of the virus. Fortunately, there is no human-to-human or animal-to-human transmission.

The West Nile virus is commonly found in Africa, West Asia, the Middle East, and recently in the United States. With the virus now a threat in Florida, the state Department of Health, along with other state and local agencies, has stepped up surveillance of the virus. This includes detecting and monitoring infected bird and mosquito populations, along with any human cases. Education is also key to protecting ourselves from contracting the West Nile virus.

Unfortunately, all the wet weather we’ve been having serves as an ideal breeding environment for mosquitoes. Water is essential for mosquito breeding. The eggs are usually deposited in water, on the sides of containers that water will soon cover, or on damp soil where they can hatch when flooded by rainwater. Around the home, suitable places are containers such as old tin cans or old tires, plant containers and tree holes.

The larvae normally occur in quiet and still water. Mosquitoes will not breed in the heavy undergrowth of weeds, bushes, or shrubs. Although these provide excellent refuge for adult mosquitoes, they do not provide a suitable habitat for larvae.

Mosquito control can be divided into two areas of responsibility: individual and public. Individuals need to eliminate breeding places on their property. This includes keeping anything that can retain water be emptied at all times. To keep mosquitoes from being a problem in the house, screens should fit and be in good repair.

Protect against bites by using a repellent. Several are effective against mosquitoes. DEET, short for diethyltoluamide, is the most commonly used repellent. It is available in liquid, aerosol, lotion and cream. When applied properly to the neck, face, arms, ankles and other exposed skin surfaces, most repellents will provide protection from mosquito bites for two to 12 hours. If desired, old clothing may be sprayed with repellent for extra protection. Care should be taken not to apply any repellent to eyes or lips.

DEET products with greater than 10 percent of the active ingredient should not be used on children. DEET can be identified as "diethyltoluamide" or "N,N-diethylmetatoluatnide" for the active ingredient of the repellent. All insect repellents must have the active ingredient appear on the label. Always check the label before buying.

The easiest way to avoid bites is to pass up outdoor activities at dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are most active. If you must be outdoors during those times, cover up by wearing long-sleeved shirts, long pants, socks, shoes and a mosquito repellent.

Osceola County has an organized mosquito control program. Organized control can accomplish more than individual efforts; however, it takes a combined effort to protect us. To prevent yourself from contracting the West Nile virus, you must protect yourself from mosquitoes.

To help the Florida Department of Health detect and monitor the West Nile virus, please report any dead birds on the Internet at Bird Mortality Data or call the West Nile hotline at 1-800-871-9703.
*Osceola County Master Gardeners classes begin in September. Call (321) 697-3000. "Landscape Pest Management" will be at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Poinciana Library and at 6:30 p.m. Thursday at the Central Library. Registration is required.

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