

Hunters and Hikers: Protect Yourself from Diseases

Thousands of Texas hunters and hikers are taking to the woods and fields in pursuit of deer, doves and the great outdoors. Unfortunately, they're not alone. Billions of critters that can carry diseases will be out there, too.

Hunters, campers and hikers have an increased risk of exposure to diseases transmitted by ticks, fleas and mosquitoes and to diseases spread by wild animals, cautions the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS). "But encounters with insects and wildlife are less likely to cause problems if people know what they're dealing with, what the symptoms of infection are and some simple precautions they can take to protect themselves," said Eric Fonken, veterinarian with DSHS' zoonosis control division.

West Nile virus can cause encephalitis and is spread through the bite of an infected mosquito. Encephalitis is an inflammation of the brain and meningitis is an inflammation of the covering of the brain or spinal cord that may be caused by one of several mosquito-borne viruses. Symptoms can include intense headache, high fever, nausea, muscle tenderness, partial unconsciousness and even coma. Although unlikely, death may occur.

As of Nov. 13, DSHS had recorded 363 human cases of West Nile virus meningo-encephalitis in 75 Texas counties this year, including 27 deaths.

West Nile virus is only one illness with which people who enjoy the outdoors have to contend. With **Lyme disease**, which is the most frequently diagnosed tick-borne problem in the United States, there may be skin lesions or rashes. If left untreated, severe damage to the joints, heart and nervous system may result. In addition, **Rocky Mountain spotted fever**, another disease that is spread by ticks and that produces a rash, can cause serious illness and even death if not treated quickly. Exposure to the bacteria that causes **tularemia**, yet another tick-borne disease, also can occur from handling carcasses of wild rabbits and rodents.

Plague, common in wild rodent populations of West Texas, is transmitted to people by fleas or by direct contact with infected animals such as prairie dogs, squirrels, cats, rats and mice. This dreaded disease sometimes includes the presence of painful, swollen lymph nodes. Unless treatment is sought quickly, death may result.

"Many of these diseases begin with flu-like symptoms such as fever, chills, headache and body aches," Fonken said. "However, symptoms can worsen quickly and affect various systems of the body."

The best way to avoid getting these diseases is to protect yourself against insect bites:

- Use insect repellent containing DEET, following package directions carefully.
- Stay on trails and avoid areas of overgrown brush and tall grasses.

- Wear protective clothing such as a hat, a long-sleeve shirt and long pants tucked into boots or socks. Wear light-colored clothes to easily spot ticks.
- Check your body carefully for ticks every few hours. Ticks are small, easy to miss and will attach to any part of the body from head to toe, so look carefully.

Some diseases are spread by contact with dust particles containing a virus; others by direct contact with infected animals or animal carcasses.

Infected rodents such as rats and mice spread **hantavirus infection** to people. A rodent may have the virus in its droppings, urine and saliva. From there, the virus can spread in the air on dust particles. “You can become infected by inhaling dust that contains the virus,” said Fonken. “Cleaning cabins, sheds or barns without a mask can increase your chances of coming in contact with hantavirus.”

Early symptoms of hantavirus infection are much like those of flu. The disease may lead to extreme difficulty with breathing, possibly followed by death. Patients may recover through supportive treatment, but antibiotics will not cure a hantavirus infection.

Deer hunters need to be aware that deer can share the bacterium that causes **anthrax** in people and that feral hogs can carry **brucellosis**. Care should be taken when handling all wild-animal carcasses, including wearing latex gloves when field dressing those animals.

Rabies is a viral infection of the nervous system that may affect almost any warm-blooded animal. “It is impossible to tell by looking at an animal whether it is infected with the rabies virus, so avoid contact with any wild animals. Especially do not try to assist injured animals or touch dead ones,” warned Fonken. “If you see an obviously sick animal or suffer an animal bite or scratch, contact a game warden, a park employee, or an animal control or law enforcement officer as soon as possible.”

Rabies is present in many wild-animal populations in Texas, especially skunks, bats, raccoons, coyotes and foxes. Humans usually are infected through a bite by a rabid animal. Rabies is always fatal once symptoms begin, which is why you should immediately consult a doctor if any animal bites you.

More information is available online at www.DSHS.state.tx.us/zoonosis.

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