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County of San Diego Vector Control Program

iLUCHE contra las Picaduras!

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Amazing Grace

What you don't know can hurt you! Just ask Grace Oberst, a San Diego County resident, who contracted West Nile Virus in September 2007, at the age of 67. Though Grace was aware that the virus is present in San Diego County, she didn't know how hard the virus could hit. She didn't know how to protect herself from the virus and the mosquitoes that transmit the disease from infected birds to people. And she didn't know about the symptoms associated with the virus. Like a lot of people, she "didn't think it would ever happen to me."

West Nile Virus can be difficult to diagnose as it can produce a wide variety of symptoms. Most people that contract the disease don't develop any symptoms at all, while others develop mild symptoms including headaches, muscle stiffness, rash, fever and nausea. In other words, West Nile Virus can appear to be the flu or any number of other illnesses. Mild symptoms typically last a few days to a few weeks.

The virus can also cause more serious illnesses including encephalitis (an inflammation of the brain) and meningitis (an inflammation of the tissue surrounding her brain and spinal column). This can result in numbness, paralysis, tremors, stiff neck, severe headache and vision loss. In the most severe cases, it can even result in death. (Nearly 1,200 deaths have been reported nationwide since 1999, when the disease was first discovered in the U.S.) The neurological effects of West Nile Virus, such as paralysis and weakness, can be permanent.



A Long Journey

Grace's symptoms began with simple flu-like symptoms "that progressed very quickly," she said. So quickly that in just a couple of days, she was taken to the hospital. On the way, she slipped into a coma that would last nearly two weeks.

During her first week in the hospital, doctors struggled to diagnose her illness. Luckily, Grace's son-in-law saw a news story on West Nile Virus and demanded that the doctors test for it. They found that she did indeed have the virus. Grace's illness progressed to include both encephalitis and meningitis, which left her extremely weak and emaciated.

While her recovery is nearly complete, it has taken almost three years, including a full year of physical therapy. Grace realizes just how fortunate she is to have come this far. Today, she still struggles with her balance coming down stairs and hasn't yet regained the strength or endurance she once had. She also has little memory of the days leading up to her hospitalization.

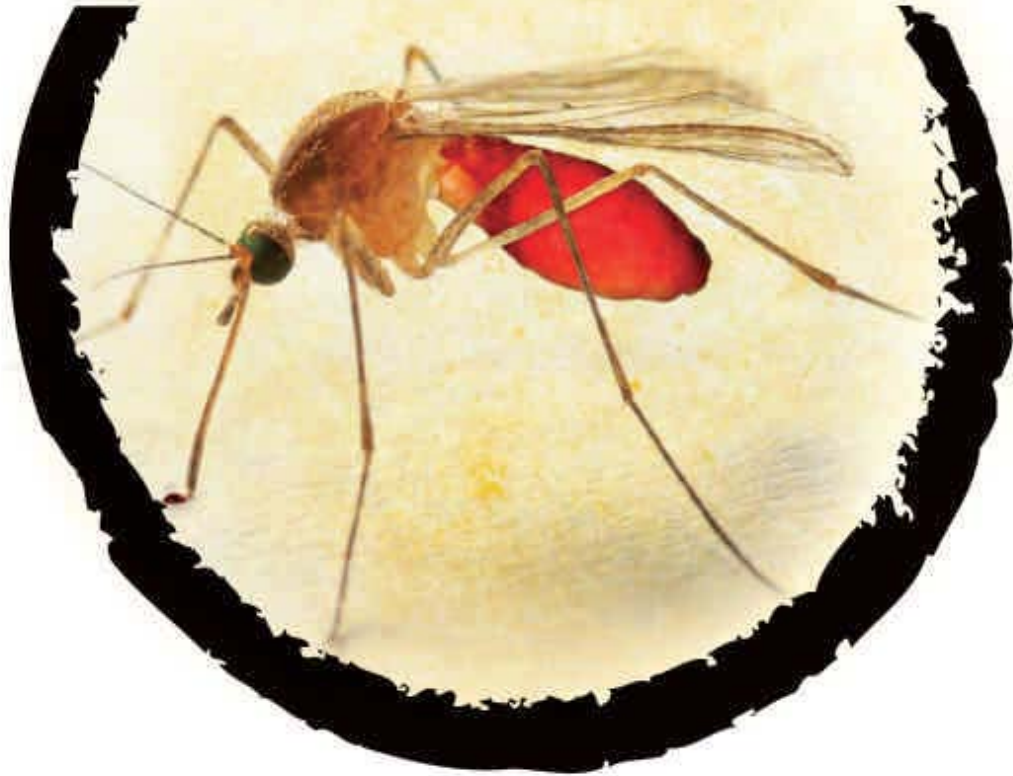
"I used to be able to walk for extended periods," she adds. "I miss that and I hope to get back to longer walks. It's the one thing I still can't manage."

Some of the victims who have suffered neurological effects of the disease have not been as fortunate and continue to suffer from poor health and limited activity levels.

What You Need to Know

- There is no vaccine or cure for West Nile Virus
- In nearly all local human West Nile Virus cases, mosquitoes were found in backyard water sources near victims' homes
- Recent rains and upcoming warm weather are creating a perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes in the county
- Preventing mosquito breeding and protecting yourself from bites are the most effective means of avoiding the virus

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