

Arthropod Panic

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

On several occasions in recent weeks I've seen news reports, somewhat sensationalized in my opinion, regarding threats to humans from arthropods. One report had to do with Zika virus in the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, another report was reporting that West Nile Virus had been detected in Kansas mosquitoes already this year, and a third report was about Lone Star Ticks and the red meat allergy condition known as alpha-gal allergy. Every report that I read made it sound like these were nearly recent developments that were going to be a modern day plague. And people wonder why I don't like to watch the news.

What people need to be aware of is that we have always had arthropods capable of making us sick. Tick borne diseases are nothing new. We have at least eight known disease in Kansas that are tick borne - and that doesn't include alpha-gal allergy which isn't technically a disease, but a food allergy. All told, we have a few dozen confirmed cases of all of these diseases in Kansas every year. Protecting yourself from ticks is not a new requirement.

A lot of the hub-bub about the red meat allergy centers around the Lone Star tick. Again, this is not a new resident in Kansas. They were here when I started this job 35 years ago. Are there more of them now? Yes, and that is likely due to warming weather patterns. If you've ever found dozens of tiny ticks on you, sometimes called seed ticks, then you have encountered Lone Star ticks.

West Nile Virus (WNV) has been in the state since 1999. Less than one percent of the people infected with WNV will develop symptoms. Many of us walking around today have probably been exposed and never knew it. In Kansas the primary mosquito species that carries WNV are the *Culex* mosquitoes. There are five species of *Culex* mosquito in the state. Most of them are small and only fly short distances. They also can carry other diseases. For some reason, *Culex* mosquitoes don't get too active feeding on humans until late summer, July through September. *Culex* mosquitoes overwinter as adults so a mosquito that fed on a WNV bird last fall likely carried the virus through the winter so if tested this spring, it would test positive for WNV.

Finally Zika virus. First and foremost there have been no cases of local transmission of Zika virus in Kansas. There are two *Aedes* mosquitoes found in Kansas that could carry Zika virus, according to testing in other areas. There are several other species of *Aedes* mosquitoes in Kansas as well. *Aedes aegypti*, the species most often mentioned in Zika virus spread is also known as the Yellow Fever mosquito. The two species of mosquitoes of concern are neither one native to Kansas and probably have to move back into the state from southern states every year.

Don't let overly sensationalized stories about arthropod borne disease put you into a state of panic. We have always been at risk from arthropod borne diseases. The species that are being talked about have been here a long time already. Mosquito and tick borne diseases are prevalent the world around and as the climate warms we will be at an increasing risk to more and more of them. But take the time to read and learn what the real risks are from these diseases. Take the steps you need to protect you and your family. Don't fall into the trap of trying strange and odd remedies or gadgets, fall back on time proven repellents for skin and clothing. If you have questions about any of these arthropods, don't hesitate to contact me at the Extension Office, 238-4161.