

West Nile outbreak may be worst in U.S. history

By Donald G. McNeil Jr., New York Times

The nation is heading toward the worst outbreak of West Nile disease in the 13 years that the virus has been on this continent, federal health authorities said Wednesday. But it is still unclear where and how far cases will spread. Dallas declared an emergency last week, and West Nile deaths have been concentrated in Texas and a few nearby states, including Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma and South Dakota.

So far this year, there have been 1,118 cases and 41 deaths reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Lyle R. Petersen, who heads the agency's division of vector-borne diseases, said in a telephone news conference Wednesday.

"That's the highest number of cases ever reported to the CDC by the third week of August," he added. "And cases are trending upward."

Because it takes some time for symptoms to develop and cases to be reported, those people were probably bitten by the mosquitoes that infected them two to three weeks ago, he said, but the agency expects cases to keep increasing through the end of September.

It takes three days to two weeks after a bite for symptoms to come on, but they may then be rapid and overwhelming.

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