

Health Matters



from the Kane County Health Department

— June 17, 2015 —

Trending Matters:



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The danger of radon: One survivor's story in her own words

Barbara Sorgatz was baffled. She had no reason to think anything was wrong with her lungs. She never smoked, her family history left no clue there could be anything wrong. She never found herself exposed to a significant amount of second-hand smoke. But there was a problem. She happened to be visiting her doctor for something unrelated to her lungs when she heard those words she would never forget: "We found a spot, a tiny, tiny spot. It's probably nothing."

Well, it was something, Stage 1B lung cancer to be exact, and a month later she was in surgery. Her cancer was blamed on radon gas, the result of the naturally-occurring geology in northern Illinois. Radon is an odorless, colorless, tasteless gas that is produced by decaying uranium and radium in soil and rock that seeps up into our homes. Radon gas is inhaled and absorbed into the lungs, causing lung cell damage. It is the leading cause of lung cancer among non-smokers, and the second-leading cause of lung cancer over all.

Barb, who works in Kane County and is a member of the Kane County Healthy Places Coalition, was lucky to have caught her condition early and be able to install a mitigation system in her home. "If I can save even one life, then I feel that this lung cancer has been worth getting," she said.

Below is her story in her own words:

My name is Barb Sorgatz and I am a radon-induced lung cancer survivor.

I have lived in my home for 25 years. I was diagnosed in January 2007 with Stage 1B lung cancer and had 20% of my left lung removed a month later. Thank God the cancer was caught early, but only by accident on a CT scan when I went to the emergency room seven months earlier for a gall



bladder attack. The doctors have told me over and over how lucky I was to have had that attack. Otherwise, by the time I would have developed any symptoms, the cancer would have advanced to Stage IV and it would have been too late for treatment.

Having never smoked before nor been exposed to a significant amount of second hand smoke, I was puzzled as to how I developed lung cancer with no family history of it. Upon doing research on the Internet, I was surprised to discover that radon is estimated to be the second leading cause of lung cancer in the U.S. today, and a leading cause of lung cancer in healthy people who have never smoked.

Certain areas of DuPage County, where I live, are known for high levels of radon, including my own neighborhood. I knew there was radon here but was not aware of the long term effects of radon exposure. I purchased a home test kit, conducted the test and sent it to the lab. The results revealed that the radon levels in my home were five times the EPA recommended level. And the irony is that I have worked in the field of public health for over 20 years, yet I knew nothing about radon.

I have since had a radon mitigation system installed in my home that has lowered the radon levels to within the acceptable EPA range.

You can protect yourself and your family against radon poisoning. Make sure your home is tested for dangerous levels of radon. If high levels are found, have a mitigation system professionally installed.

Radon test kits are available for purchase at local hardware stores and from the health department. Costs range from \$12 to \$15, which includes postage and laboratory testing.



More information about radon is available on the Kane County Health Department Website [HERE](#).



Some like it hot, but not too hot.

Midway through June and we've already had a taste of hot, humid weather. Is this what we can expect for the summer of 2015? No one knows right now, but what we do know is that it's time to look ahead and prepare ourselves for the type of heat we're used to in our area. According to the National Weather Service (NWS), heat is one of the leading weather-related killers in the United States, resulting in hundreds of fatalities each year.

Residents can visit the KCHD website to learn of any updates of excessive heat throughout the summer by visiting our website. The Health Department will follow the NWS' system of warnings and advisories and be posting them all summer. Learn more about the definitions of the terms used by NWS by visiting the agency's website by clicking [HERE](#).



Further, as we know that heat can affect air quality, we will be posting alerts on the Air Quality Index as issued by the Partners for Clean Air on our website [HERE](#).

Historically, heat waves have had a devastating effect on people. In 1995 more than 700 deaths in the Chicago area were attributed to heat, making it the deadliest weather event in Chicago history. We also know that in August 2003, a record heat wave in Europe claimed an estimated 50,000 lives. As recently as last month, as many as 2,500 people died during a heat wave in India.

Heat related illnesses can range from heat cramps to heat exhaustion to the more serious heat stroke. No one can know exactly the weather pattern we will experience over the next three or four months. But what we can control is our preparedness and knowledge for heat related events.

Visit our website [HERE](#) to learn more about and prepare for the dangers of heat.

Four National Weather Service Alert Terms to Know:



Excessive Heat Outlook

Using a combination of temperature and humidity over a certain number of days the Excessive Heat Outlook is designed to provide an indication of areas where people and animals may need to take precautions against the heat during the months of May to November.



Excessive Heat Watch

Issued when conditions are favorable for an excessive heat event in the next 12 to 48 hours. A Watch is used when the risk of a heat wave has increased but its occurrence and timing is still uncertain. A Watch provides enough lead time so that those who need to prepare can do so.



Excessive Heat Advisory

Issued within 12 hours of the onset of a heat index of at least 105 degrees F, but less than 115 degrees F, for less than three hours per day, or nighttime lows above 80 degrees for two consecutive days.



Excessive Heat Warning

Issued within 12 hours of the onset of a heat index of at least 105 degrees for more than three hours per day for two consecutive days, or heat index more than 115 degrees F for any period of time.

Hot weather could mean a hot West Nile season



As we've seen above, the hot, summer weather is upon us, which in turn leads to more mosquitoes. The result means we could start seeing West Nile virus activity.

Predicting West Nile virus activity is a lot like predicting the weather, as it can change week to week. The key factors in determining high or low levels of West Nile virus activity are temperature and rainfall. Although people usually notice mosquitoes during rainy conditions, those mosquitoes are commonly called floodwater or nuisance mosquitoes and typically do not carry West Nile virus. In hot, dry weather, mosquitoes that do carry West Nile virus breed in stagnant water, like street catch basins and ditches, and multiply rapidly. Remember, it's never too early for you to inspect your home and yard for sources of standing water where these mosquitoes are likely to breed.

The Health Department conducts several activities to monitor West Nile virus. KCHD staff maintains mosquito traps throughout the county as a way



KCHD staffer setting a mosquito monitoring trap

to monitor its activity. The mosquitoes are trapped and then taken back to the Health Department where a test can tell whether West Nile virus is present.

Also as part of its West Nile program, the Health Department is collecting dead birds from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday to be sent to the state lab for testing. **Please call (630) 444-3040 to report the presence of freshly-dead birds (such as crows or blue jays) to determine if WNV testing is recommended.** The birds must not show any signs of decay, trauma, maggot or insect activity.

More information about WNV monitoring, including a map of the mosquito trap locations, is available on our website by clicking [HERE](#).

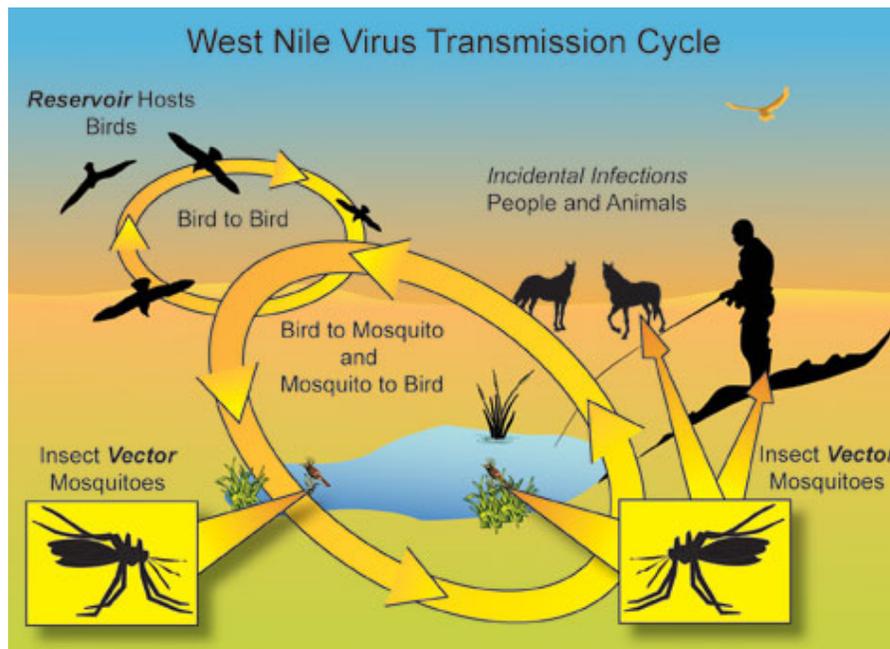


Illustration from EPA

Looking back, the last two summers have been relatively mild, which resulted in only one human case in 2014 and none the year before in 2013. However, we saw 13 cases in people in 2012, tied for the second most ever, which shows the dramatic effect weather can have.

You can protect yourself and your family against West Nile virus. Reduce your risk of being infected with WNV by using insect repellent and wearing protective clothing to prevent mosquito bites. There are no medications to treat or vaccines to prevent WNV infection. Fortunately, most people infected with WNV will have no symptoms. About 1 in 5 people who are infected will develop a fever with other symptoms. Less than 1% of infected people develop a serious, sometimes fatal, neurologic illness.

Following these few relatively easy guidelines will help ensure that you can enjoy your summer bite-free!



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