



## Early West Nile case raises concern

By [Craig Schneider](#)

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The appearance of a West Nile case two months before the peak season has worried public health officials.

But health experts acknowledge that getting people alarmed over West Nile virus has become a tougher task.

The number of confirmed cases has dropped significantly in the state and nationally. Metro Atlanta counties, looking to cut costs in a tight economy, have slashed funding for tracking and prevention.

"It's become hard to beat the drum," said Elmer Gray, an entomologist with the Georgia Cooperative Extension Service at the University of Georgia.

The confirmed case of a 54-year-old Clayton County man in early May has raised concerns that this could be an irksome season for the virus, which most often causes none to minor symptoms but can cause severe illness and even death.

"It is on us now," said Hayla Hall, spokeswoman for District 4 Public Health, a 12-county area south of Atlanta that includes Henry, Fayette and Coweta counties. "It could be a rough summer."

The heavy winter rains and warming spring temperatures could form the perfect breeding environment -- namely standing water -- for mosquitoes that carry the virus, she said. Officials advise people to tip their bird baths, empty standing water and perform other mosquito deterrents.

State workers have already begun education programs and monitoring catch basins and other breeding sites.

"The mosquito will be out and biting earlier than normal," said Ravae Graham, spokeswoman for the state Department of Community Health.

Cobb County is especially concerned that properties abandoned during the September floods could harbor breeding areas for mosquitoes, county health officials said. The county has begun treating areas around nursing homes and assisted living communities to reduce mosquito populations around people at a higher risk of severe illness from the virus.

Some health officials say it's still unclear whether metro Atlanta will see a spate of West Nile this summer. The season for the illness is generally July

to September.

Gray, the UGA expert, noted that some heavy rains can wash away and destroy the breeding areas.

In 2007, Georgia had 52 cases and one death. Last year, the state saw four cases and two deaths. Fulton County had no cases last year, officials said.

"A lot of people are getting tired of the message," said Fulton County environmental health supervisor Barney Harmon.

About one in 150 people infected with the disease will develop severe symptoms that can include high fever, convulsions, coma and paralysis. People age 50 and older and those with compromised immune systems may be more prone to serious reactions.

Gray said the decrease in government control of West Nile places the onus on individuals to take precautions, such as wearing insect repellent and checking for standing water outside their home. Other recommendations include ensuring screens are secure on windows, and wearing long sleeves, socks and pants when outdoors.

The decrease in cases may be reassuring, he said.

"But if you're the unlucky one, it's very serious," he said.

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