

Caution didn't keep West Nile virus away

County spokesman is still recovering

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As a public information officer for San Diego County, Bill Polick was there when the county called a news conference in 2001 to discuss the emerging threat of West Nile virus.

Now Polick is one of West Nile's newest victims.

The 62-year-old surfer and motorcycle enthusiast has emerged from a monthlong struggle with the virus. He lost nearly 30 pounds. He spent six days in the hospital. He remains weak and unsteady on his feet, forcing him to walk with a cane.

"You don't want to get this," Polick, spokesman for the Department of Public Works, said yesterday while sitting in the living room of his home in San Diego's Tierrasanta neighborhood.

As West Nile cases hit record levels this year, Polick said his harrowing experience serves as a warning that even the most cautious county residents are at risk.

The 26 human cases reported so far easily topped last year's record of 16, said ecologist Chris Conlan with the county's Vector Control Program. The virus has killed more than 500 birds, tripling the previous record for bird deaths set in 2005, he said.

Statewide this year, 329 people contracted the illness as of Oct. 14, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Seven people have died, though none in San Diego County.

Birds are the main carriers of the virus. They pass it on to mosquitoes, which then infect humans and other animals such as horses.

Before he became ill in late September, Polick had no indications he was at risk. In fact, he thought he had done everything possible to protect himself from the disease.

He kept containers in his yard turned over when it rained to prevent mosquitoes from breeding in stagnant water. He maintained his backyard swimming pool properly. He even wore pants and a long-sleeved shirt when he cut down a tree just a few days before he became ill.



NELVIN C. CEPEDA / Union-Tribune
Bill Polick, spokesman for the county Department of Public Works, was diagnosed with West Nile virus a month ago.

Somehow, though, a mosquito was able to bite him and pass the virus into his blood stream.

The first symptoms surfaced the morning of Sept. 26.

"I woke up with a rash from my neck to my ankles," Polick said. "I thought that was strange, but it didn't hurt."

Over the next two days he developed a fever, chills and a severe headache, and he stopped eating.

He became so disoriented and weak that he had trouble moving around on his own. "I was doing things like looking for skilletts on the staircase, and looking for water bottles in the towel cabinet," Polick said.

His wife and son rushed him to the emergency room at the University of California San Diego's Thornton Hospital in La Jolla. After he was admitted, doctors began the long task of figuring out what was wrong with him.

Blood samples from Polick were shipped to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the federal agency eventually returned a diagnosis of West Nile.

Polick said he remembers little from his stay in the hospital.

"During the first three weeks (of the illness) he probably slept 90 percent of the day," said his wife, Earleen Polick.

Most people who contract West Nile never get sick. Those who do are typically over 50 years old or have compromised immune systems. There are no treatments or vaccine for the virus. In the most severe cases, patients can die.

Polick has a ways to go before full recovery. He still tires easily, and he hasn't fully regained his appetite. "Certain foods smell like burned graham crackers. It just turns me off," he said.

He plans to return to work Nov. 10.

"I want to share my experience so that other people will take action to prevent others from getting this," he said. "Everyone is at risk."