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McAlester Couple's Lives Change After West Nile Virus Strikes

Editor's Note: The Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH) has a policy that prohibits the release of individual case information. In this unique instance, Hal and Debbie Dalton of McAlester volunteered to share their story with the news media and OSDH in order to possibly help prevent others from experiencing the debilitating effects of West Nile virus.

McAlester — “We’d sit on the back porch until dark. I’d slap a mosquito and say ‘well the mosquitoes are biting, it’s time to go in,’” said Debbie Dalton about the weeks leading up to her husband Hal’s onset of West Nile virus (WNV).

Then, virtually overnight, the Daltons’ life changed. Hal’s first signs were flu-like symptoms, tremors and weakness. Then while at the hospital, he lost his vision and the ability to use his legs.

Hal Dalton was Oklahoma’s first 2012 confirmed case of WNV.

The Daltons describe themselves as “outside people.” Golf four days a week, growing eight-foot tall tomato plants, watering the flowers and relaxing on the back porch are staples of everyday life.

The 78-year-old Dalton retired in 1993 after 39 years at Rockwell International. His wife Debbie has worked at Spirit Aerosystems for 35 years. Caring for her husband has caused her to miss more than six weeks of work. They hope that by sharing their story perhaps they can prevent other Oklahomans from getting WNV.

“We were completely ignorant about West Nile,” Hal Dalton said. “We didn’t know how serious it could be.”

Dalton contracted WNV in June and spent a total of four weeks in a Tulsa hospital and a rehabilitation center in Okmulgee. While he has regained most of his vision, he is still unable to move his legs.

Healthy, active adults who are 50 and older have the highest risk of illness caused by WNV. Most cases in Oklahoma have occurred in persons over 40 and have been neuroinvasive WNV disease, the most severe form of WNV infection that causes inflammation of the brain and spinal cord, and also the type afflicting Hal Dalton.

Illness associated with WNV ranges from no symptoms at all to milder “West Nile Fever” symptoms to serious neurologic disease. Symptoms of West Nile Fever include sudden onset of fever, headache, nausea, dizziness, and muscle weakness. Sometimes swollen lymph glands or a skin rash are also present with West Nile Fever. Symptoms of serious neurologic WNV disease can progress quickly and may include high fever, headache, stiff neck, mental confusion or disorientation, numbness, convulsions, and coma. A polio-type paralysis of an arm or leg may also be caused by WNV. Some of the neurological effects of WNV may be permanent or fatal. Persons should seek medical attention if any of these symptoms develop, especially within two weeks after mosquito bites.

Although the Daltons won't be using their OU football tickets this year, Hal said Debbie has a motivational message for him.

"Debbie told me if they go to the national championship, she's going to roll me or drag me there," he said.

Precautions against West Nile Virus:

- Use an insect repellent containing DEET on exposed skin and clothing when you go outdoors. (Insect repellent with permethrin should be used on clothing only.)
- Place mosquito repellent in a handy and visible location in the home for easy access.
- Repair or install window and door screens to keep mosquitoes out of your home.
- Prevent items such as buckets, cans, flower pots, and tires from holding standing water so mosquitoes don't have a place to breed.
- Empty, clean and refill your bird baths and pet's outdoor water bowl daily.
- Clean leaves and debris from rain gutters regularly to ensure they are not clogged.

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Photo Attached -- Hal and Debbie Dalton, McAlester, OK, Aug. 16, 2012



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