When Mosquitoes Were Killers in America

The battle against mosquitoes and the diseases they spread

BY LAUREN TARSHIS

They bit the bejeweled necks of ancient Egyptian kings and sucked the blood of Mayan farmers. They swarmed Chinese empresses and feasted on George Washington's troops. What are these biting, buzzing nuisances? Mosquitoes, and they have been harassing humans since, well, forever.

Yet mosquitoes are far more than a nuisance. They are also the spreaders of dangerous diseases. In fact, mosquito bites lead to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people every year.

 Bite By Bite

One of the most serious diseases spread by mosquitoes is malaria. It was once believed that malaria was caused by moist, foul-smelling air. (The word malaria comes from the Italian words mala meaning “bad” and aria meaning “air.”) This was a logical guess; most people who got sick lived near swamps or marshes. It wasn’t until the late 1800s that scientists discovered that air was not the culprit. Mosquitoes, which thrive in swamps, marshes, and other wetlands, were to blame for making people sick.

Since then, researchers have learned a lot about malaria. For example, they now know that of the roughly 3,500 species of mosquitoes, only a few dozen carry the disease. So how do these mosquitoes transmit malaria? First, a mosquito bites someone infected with malaria. A few days later, when the mosquito is ready for its next meal, it bites someone else. As the mosquito jabs the new victim’s flesh, malaria germs known as Plasmodium enter that person’s blood.

In this way, bite by itchy bite, 212 million people are infected with malaria every year. Many live in crowded areas where mosquitoes easily spread the disease from person to person. Those who become sick get high fevers, bone-rattling chills, and painful muscle aches. Most recover—but many do not. Malaria kills roughly 430,000 people a year. The majority of victims are children under age 5.

Over the past decade, much progress has been made in preventing and treating malaria. But as of now, there is no cure or vaccine that works for everyone.

War on Mosquitoes

Today, most malaria cases occur in the world’s poorest countries, where medical care is often lacking. (More than 90 percent of malaria deaths are in sub-Saharan Africa.) But until recently, malaria was a big problem in the U.S. too. George Washington suffered from it. So did Abraham Lincoln and Civil War general Ulysses S. Grant.

In the early 1900s, millions of Americans were infected. The problem was most severe in the Southern states, where the warm, wet climate provides ideal mosquito breeding grounds.

DDT worked well—so well that by 1949, malaria was no longer a health issue in the U.S. Today, if someone in the U.S. gets malaria, he or she almost certainly got it while visiting another country.

But there is a dark side to this success story. In the 1960s, thanks in large part to the work of crusading nature journalist Rachel Carson, scientists learned that DDT was doing more than ridding the world of mosquitoes. It was also harming birds and other wildlife and causing health problems in humans.

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