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West Nile virus cases were overstated in 2008 across U.S.

By Chris Joyner, USA TODAY

State health departments across the nation are learning this month the number of West Nile virus cases they thought they had in 2008 was overstated — in one case by more than 35% — because of faulty testing kits.

The problem test kits, from Inverness Medical Innovations of Waltham, Mass., resulted in incorrect diagnoses of West Nile virus in at least 42 states, said Kristen Janusz, an epidemic intelligence service officer with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The mosquito-borne illness, first identified in the U.S. in 1999, produces mild flu-like symptoms and can cause death.

Before the errors were discovered, CDC figures showed there were 1,370 West Nile cases in 2008. That number will go down when the CDC releases corrected figures next month to exclude hundreds of misdiagnosed cases nationwide, spokeswoman Emily Zielinski-Gutierrez said.

The CDC reported 3,360 West Nile cases in 2007. The number of reported cases has been declining over the past few years because of natural cycles in weather and the mosquito population.

The CDC raised concerns about the faulty kits. "If a person had a false-positive test result for West Nile virus disease, this may have resulted in the incorrect diagnosis and failure to consider other possible causes of their illness," the CDC stated on its website.

A false notion that cases are up also could lead states to alter prevention plans. Zielinski-Gutierrez said some states may want to adjust their prevention planning once they get the new results.

According to the CDC, the faulty test kits were sent to labs in Minnesota, North Dakota, Pennsylvania and Texas between July and September.

Inverness spokesman Doug Guarino said a component failed in the problem test kits. He added that the problem has been corrected, and the company is working with the Food and Drug Administration to get the kits back on the market by this spring.

"There shouldn't be any further issues," he said.

Inverness produces one of four FDA-approved kits for West Nile virus, according to the CDC.

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Mississippi had one of the largest number of incorrect diagnoses, with false-positive readings in one of three cases. Janusz said. The Mississippi Department of Health got the new numbers last week: 65, down from 101, according to state epidemiologist Mary Currier. New York may have been the first to notice the problem in late summer, when public health officials in the state noticed six positive tests turned out not to be West Nile, state Department of Health spokeswoman Claire Pospisil said.

Pospisil said the health department notified the CDC and it sent out an alert in October warning of the bad kits.

Among other states affected:

- **Colorado.** 24 of the state's 71 West Nile cases turned out to be bogus, said John Pape an epidemiologist with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.
- **Pennsylvania.** Department of Health epidemiologist Stephen Ostroff said the bad kits generated 19 false diagnoses.
- **Minnesota.** 10 of the state's 21 cases were found not to be West Nile, said Doug Schultz, of the state Health Department.

Joyner reports for The Clarion-Ledger in Jackson, Miss.

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