

West Nile Virus (WNV)

Information Sheet

What is West Nile Virus?

West Nile virus (WNV) is a virus that can cause illness in birds, mammals and humans. It is carried by infected mosquitoes. This virus is named after the West Nile region of Uganda, where it was first isolated in 1937.

How is West Nile virus spread?

- WNV is spread to humans by the bite of an infected mosquito. A mosquito becomes infected by biting a bird that has the virus. Your chance of being bitten by an infected mosquito is rare.
- WNV is not transmitted from person-to-person. The virus cannot spread through touching or kissing someone with the disease, or from a health care worker who has treated someone with the disease.
- WNV can be transmitted from an infected person through blood transfusions or transplanted organs.
- At this time, research is ongoing to determine if the virus can spread from a mother to her unborn child or through breast milk.
- The risk is very low that a person can be infected by handling a WNV-infected bird. Nevertheless, avoid handling dead birds or animals with your bare hands; use gloves or double plastic bags instead.

If WNV is reported in the area and a mosquito bites me, am I likely to get sick?

Even in areas where WNV has been detected, very few mosquitoes are likely to be infected. The chance that a bite is from an infected mosquito is small. Nevertheless, it is important to protect yourself from mosquito bites in areas where WNV activity has been documented.

What are the symptoms of West Nile virus illness?

- Research shows that 4 out of 5 people who are bitten by an infected mosquito do not show any symptoms of the virus.
- In the few people who do develop West Nile virus illness, symptoms generally begin 3 to 15 days after being bitten by an infected mosquito. There may be fever, muscle weakness, stiff neck, confusion, severe headache, skin rash, and a sudden sensitivity to light. If you experience any of these symptoms, see your doctor for an assessment.
- In rare cases, the virus can cause more serious illness, particularly in the elderly and those with compromised immune systems. There may be inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) or inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord (meningitis). Encephalitis symptoms include the rapid onset of severe headache, high fever, stiff neck, confusion, loss of consciousness (coma), and/or muscle weakness.
- At its most serious state, infection with WNV can cause permanent neurological damage and can be fatal.

Is there anything I can do to protect myself?

At this time, there is no vaccine available to protect people against WNV. The best protection is to prevent mosquito bites by doing the following:

- Try to stay indoors when mosquitoes are most active, usually at dawn and dusk.
- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants whenever you are outdoors.
- Make sure that door and window screens do not have holes and that they fit tightly in your windows.
- Use insect repellent containing DEET. The concentration of DEET should be no more than 30 percent for adults and no more than 10 percent for children. Do not use DEET on infants under 6 months old.
- Reduce local mosquito populations by removing garbage and eliminating standing water where mosquitoes can breed (for example, pool covers, flower pots, children's toys, old tires).