

Fact Sheet: West Nile Virus (WNV)

What is West Nile Virus?

WNV is a mosquito-borne virus that can cause encephalitis or meningitis in humans and other animals. People get West Nile Virus from the bite of a mosquito that is infected with the virus.

How is it spread?

Most often WNV is spread by the bite of an infected mosquito. Mosquitoes become infected with WNV when they feed on infected animals. After 10-14 days the mosquitoes can transmit the virus to humans and animals while biting. Once the virus is in someone's bloodstream, it multiplies and may cause illness. You cannot "catch" the virus from touching or being close to someone with the disease.

What is the risk of illness in humans?

The risk of getting West Nile encephalitis/meningitis is limited to people who are in areas where WNV is present. The chance you will become seriously ill from any one mosquito bite is extremely small. The risk of getting sick is higher for people who are over 50 years of age, or persons with a weakened immune system.

What are the symptoms?

Most people infected with WNV do not have any symptoms of illness, but some (1 in 4) may become ill 3-15 days after the bite of an infected mosquito. In a few cases, mostly among the elderly, death may occur.

Mild illness: Slight fever, headache, body aches, and sometimes a skin rash & swollen glands.

Serious illness: High fever, severe headache, stiff neck, mental confusion, convulsions, muscle weakness and paralysis.

How is it treated?

There is no specific treatment for West Nile encephalitis/meningitis since antibiotics are not effective against viruses. Hospitalization is usually necessary for supportive care, which may include intravenous fluids, prevention of pneumonia, and breathing assistance, if necessary.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

How is West Nile infection prevented?

There is no vaccine for humans available, but there are many steps that you can take to reduce your risk of becoming infected:

- Avoid areas where there are large numbers of mosquitoes and at the times when they are most active, typically around sunrise and sunset.
- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants whenever you are in areas with lots of mosquitoes.
- Repair and maintain window and door screens to keep mosquitoes out of buildings.
- Limit mosquito breeding sites by draining standing water in your yard. Empty water from flower pots/saucers, clogged gutters, wading pools, swimming pool and patio furniture covers, discarded tires, pails and buckets and other items that can collect water. Change the water in birdbaths and horse troughs at least two times a week.
- Cut tall weeds and grass to remove mosquito hiding and resting areas. Apply insect repellent that contains DEET, picaridin, or oil of lemon eucalyptus to exposed skin; spray clothing with repellent because mosquitoes may bite through thin clothing. Wash repellent off after coming back indoors. **Note:** whenever you use an insect repellent, be sure to read and follow the label directions for safe use.
- **CAUTION: Do not use DEET repellent on children under 2 months of age.**
- Avoid applying repellent to the hands of children because repellents may irritate the eyes and mouth.
- Visit www.aap.org/family/wnv-jun03.htm for more information about using DEET on children.

How do we monitor for the disease?

We map the locations of dead birds, especially crows, ravens, and blue jays. We also monitor and test ill humans and horses for WNV, St. Louis Encephalitis (SLE) and Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE).

Can West Nile Virus infect other animals?

Although the vast majority of infections have been identified in birds, the Centers for Disease Control have received reports of WNV in horses, dogs, cats, bats, chipmunks, skunks, squirrels, domestic rabbits and raccoons.

Need to report a dead bird?

Please call Washtenaw County's
West Nile Virus Hotline at: (734) 544-6750

