

West Nile Virus

FACT SHEET



Washtenaw County
Health Department

What is West Nile Virus?

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 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 5) 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 (West Nile fever): Fever, headache, body aches, sometimes a skin rash & swollen glands.

Serious illness (encephalitis/meningitis): 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.

How is it prevented?

- There is currently no vaccine for humans available. However, there are many steps that you can take to reduce your risk of becoming infected:
- Wear light-colored clothing, long sleeves, long pants, shoes and socks when outdoors, if possible.
- Use an **EPA-registered insect repellent** containing DEET, 2-undecanone, Citronella, Catnip Oil, Oil of Lemon Eucalyptus, Picaridin, IR3535, or p-Menthane-3,8-diol. Apply repellent to exposed skin or clothing, especially when mosquitoes are most active (dawn and dusk). Wash repellent off after coming back indoors. **Note:** Be sure to read and follow the label directions. Avoid applying repellent to the hands of children. Products containing oil of lemon eucalyptus should not be used on children under three years of age. Use the EPA's search tool to find the best repellent for you: epa.gov/insect-repellents/find-repellent-right-you
- Repair and maintain window and door screens to keep mosquitoes out of buildings.
- Limit mosquito breeding sites by emptying water from flower pots/saucers, clogged gutters, wading pools, swimming pool and patio furniture covers, discarded tires, 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.

How do we monitor for the disease?

We track reports 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 infect other animals?

Although the vast majority of infections have been identified in birds, WNV has been found in horses, dogs, cats, bats, chipmunks, skunks, squirrels, domestic rabbits, raccoons and other animals.

Need to report a dead bird?

To report a dead bird, use the State of Michigan's online report form at www.michigan.gov/westnile.

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 contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.