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WEST NILE VIRUS

What Is West Nile Virus?

West Nile virus (WNV) is a potentially serious illness. Experts believe WNV is established as a seasonal epidemic in North America that flares up in the summer and continues into the fall. This fact sheet contains important information that can help you recognize and prevent West Nile Virus infection.

What Are the Symptoms of WNV?

- **Serious Symptoms in a Few People.** About one in 150 people infected with WNV will develop severe illness. The severe symptoms can include high fever, headache, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness, vision loss, numbness and paralysis. These symptoms may last several weeks, and neurological effects may be permanent. In the most serious cases, death can occur.
- **Milder Symptoms in Some People.** About 1 of 5 people who become infected have symptoms such as fever, headache and body aches, nausea, vomiting, and sometimes swollen lymph glands or a skin rash on the chest, stomach and back. Symptoms can last for as short as a few days, though even healthy people have become sick for several weeks.
- **No Symptoms in Most People.** Approximately 80 percent of people (about 4 out of 5) who are infected with WNV may not show any symptoms at all.

How Does West Nile Virus Spread?

- **Infected Mosquitoes.** Most often, WNV is spread by the bite of an infected mosquito. Mosquitoes become infected when they feed on infected birds. Infected mosquitoes can then spread WNV to humans and other animals when they bite.
- **Transfusions, Transplants, and Mother-to-Child.** In a very small number of cases, WNV also has been spread through blood transfusions, organ transplants, breastfeeding and even during pregnancy from mother to baby.
- **Not through touching.** WNV is not spread from person-to-person; it cannot be spread through casual contact such as touching or kissing a person with the virus.

How Soon Do Infected People Get Sick?

People typically develop symptoms between 3 and 14 days after they are bitten by the infected mosquito.

How Is WNV Infection Treated?

There is no specific treatment or vaccine for WNV infection. In cases with milder symptoms, people experience symptoms such as fever and aches that pass on their own, although even healthy people have become sick for several weeks. In more severe cases, people usually need to go to the hospital where they can receive supportive treatment including intravenous fluids, help with breathing and nursing care.

What Should I Do if I Think I Have WNV?

People experiencing mild symptoms of WNV infection do not necessarily need to seek medical attention for this infection though they may choose to do so. If they develop symptoms of severe WNV illness, such as unusually severe headaches or confusion, they should seek medical attention **immediately**. Severe WNV illness usually requires hospitalization. Pregnant women and nursing mothers are encouraged to talk to their doctor if they develop symptoms that could be WNV.

What Is the Risk of Getting Sick from WNV?

People over 50 at higher risk to get severe illness. People over the age of 50 are more likely to develop serious symptoms of WNV if they do get sick and should take special care to avoid mosquito bites.

Being outside means you're at risk. The more time you're outdoors, the greater the risk you could be bitten by an infected mosquito. Pay attention to avoiding mosquito bites if you spend a lot of time outside, either working or playing.

Risk through medical procedures is very low. All donated blood is checked for WNV before being used. The risk of getting WNV through blood transfusions and organ transplants is very small, and should not prevent people who need surgery from having it. If you have concerns, talk to your doctor.

What Can I Do to Prevent WNV?

The easiest and best way to avoid WNV is to prevent mosquito bites.

- When you are outdoors, use insect repellent containing an EPA-registered active ingredient (such as DEET [N, N-diethyl-m-toluamide] or Picaridin [KBR 3023]). In addition, certain products which contain permethrin are recommended for use on clothing, shoes, bed nets, and camping gear. Follow the directions on the package.
- Many mosquitoes are most active at dusk and dawn. Be sure to use insect repellent and wear long sleeves and pants at these times or consider staying indoors during these hours.
- Make sure you have good screens on your windows and doors to keep mosquitoes out.
- Get rid of mosquito breeding sites by emptying standing water from flower pots, buckets and barrels. Change the water in pet dishes and replace the water in bird baths weekly. Drill holes in tire swings so water drains out. Keep children's wading pools empty and on their sides when they aren't being used.
- There is currently no WNV vaccine available for humans

If a person contracts West Nile virus, does that person develop a natural immunity to future infection by the virus?

It is assumed that immunity will be lifelong; however, studies are currently being conducted to fully determine length of immunity and the possibility of reoccurrence.

Can My Pet Be Infected?

West Nile Virus has been confirmed in some domestic animals, including pet birds, dogs, and cats. Horses can become seriously ill, if infected. There is a vaccine available for horses which need to be given every year. It is important to remember that birds and animals cannot transmit West Nile Virus to people. For questions about West Nile Virus in pets and other domestic animals, please contact your veterinarian.

What Else Should I Know?

If you find a dead bird: Don't handle the body with your bare hands. If the bird is a Corvid (crow, raven, jay, or magpie) or a raptor (owl, hawk, eagle, etc.) call your Regional Fish and Game Office to report the bird. If you need to pick up a dead bird or local authorities tell you to simply dispose of it: Avoid bare-handed contact with any dead animals, and use gloves or an inverted plastic bag to place the bird carcass in a garbage bag and dispose of it with your routine trash.