

Northeast Health District
Athens, Georgia

WEST NILE VIRUS
Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is West Nile virus?

A: West Nile virus is a mosquito-borne virus that can cause encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) or meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord). West Nile virus is closely related to St. Louis encephalitis virus, which is found in the United States.

Q: How is West Nile virus spread?

A: West Nile virus is spread to humans by the bite of an infected mosquito. A mosquito becomes infected by biting a bird that carries the virus. You or your child cannot get West Nile virus from a person who has the disease. West Nile virus is not spread by person-to-person contact such as touching, kissing, or caring for someone who is infected.

Q: Where did the West Nile virus come from?

A: Outbreaks of the West Nile virus have occurred before in Egypt, Asia, Israel, South Africa, parts of Europe and Australia. Before 1999, the West Nile virus had never before been found in the United States.

Q: Can you get West Nile virus directly from birds?

A: West Nile virus cannot spread directly from birds to people. However, dead birds should not be handled with bare hands. **Use gloves to carefully place dead birds in a double plastic bag and then place the dead birds in the outdoor trash.**

Q: Besides mosquitoes, can you get West Nile virus directly from other insects or ticks?

A: Infected mosquitoes are the primary source for West Nile. Ticks may prove to be vectors of WNV transmission in the future.

Q: What are the symptoms of West Nile virus?

A: Most people who were infected with West Nile virus have no symptoms or experience mild illness such as fever, headache and body aches before fully recovering. In outbreaks in other parts of the world, some persons also developed a mild rash or swollen lymph glands. In some individuals, particularly the elderly, West Nile virus can cause serious disease that affects brain tissue. At its most serious, it can cause permanent neurological damage and can be fatal. Encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) symptoms include the rapid onset of severe headache, high fever, stiff neck, confusion, loss of consciousness (coma), and muscle weakness. Death may result in some cases.

Q: How is West Nile virus infection diagnosed?

A: Diagnosis of West Nile virus infection is based on either isolation of virus; demonstration of antibody to WNV; or demonstration of WN viral genomic sequences in tissue, blood, CSF or other body fluids. If you have a suspect case of WNV encephalitis, please call the Georgia Division of Public Health, Notifiable Disease Unit (404) 657-2588.

Q: What is the mortality rate of WNV infection?

A: Historically, the WNV infection case-fatality rate ranges from 3% to 15% of clinically apparent cases (the higher rates are among the elderly).

Q: Is a woman's pregnancy at risk if she gets West Nile encephalitis?

A: There is no documented evidence that a pregnant woman or her fetus are at increased risk due to infection with West Nile virus.

Q: How is West Nile encephalitis treated?

A: There is no specific therapy. In more severe cases, intensive supportive therapy is indicated, i.e., hospitalization, intravenous (IV) fluids and nutrition, airway management, ventilatory support (ventilator) if needed, prevention of secondary infections (pneumonia, urinary tract, etc.), and good nursing care.

Q: Is there a vaccine against West Nile virus?

A: No.

Q: How long does it take to get sick if bitten by an infected mosquito?

A: Being bitten by an infected mosquito will not necessarily make you sick since most people who are infected with West Nile virus have no symptoms or experience mild illness. If illness were to occur, it would occur within 5 to 15 days of being bitten by an infected mosquito.

Q: What should a person do if he/she thinks they have West Nile encephalitis?

A: If a person has signs of encephalitis, with fever, muscle weakness, and confusion, he or she should seek medical care as soon as possible.

Q: Who is at risk for getting West Nile encephalitis after being bitten by an infected mosquito?

A: Persons older than 50 years of age have the highest risk of severe disease.

Q: What can I do to reduce my risk of becoming infected with West Nile virus?

A: From April to October, when mosquitoes are most active, take the following precautions:

- ◆ If outside during evening, nighttime and dawn hours when mosquitoes are most active and likely to bite, children and adults should wear protective clothing such as long pants, long-sleeved shirts, and socks.
- ◆ If outside during evening, nighttime and dawn hours, consider the use of an insect repellent containing 10% or less DEET (N, N-diethyl-methyl-meta-toluamide) for children and no more than 30% DEET for adults.
- ◆ USE DEET ACCORDING TO MANUFACTURER'S DIRECTIONS:
 - 1) Do not use DEET on infants or pregnant women.
 - 2) Do not allow young children to apply DEET themselves.
 - 3) Do not apply DEET directly to children. Apply to your own hands and then put it on the child.
 - 4) DEET is effective for approximately four hours. Avoid prolonged or excessive use of DEET. Use sparingly to cover exposed skin and clothing.
 - 5) Wash all treated skin and clothing after returning indoors.
 - 6) Store DEET out of reach of children.
 - 7) **Note that Vitamin B, ultrasonic devices, incense and bug zappers have not been shown to be effective in preventing mosquito bites.**

Q: What can I do around my home to help reduce exposure to mosquitoes?

A: Mosquitoes lay their eggs in standing water. Weeds, tall grass, and bushes provide an outdoor home for the adult *Culex pipiens* mosquito (the common house mosquito) which is most commonly associated with West Nile virus. Mosquitoes can enter homes through unscreened windows or doors, or broken screens.

- ◆ Make sure that doors and windows have tight-fitting screens. Repair or replace all screens in your home that have tears or holes.
- ◆ Remove all discarded tires from your property.
- ◆ Dispose of tin cans, plastic containers, ceramic pots, or similar water-holding containers.
- ◆ Make sure roof gutters drain properly. Clean clogged gutters in the spring and fall.
- ◆ Clean and chlorinate swimming pools, outdoor saunas and hot tubs. If not in use, keep empty and covered.
- ◆ Drain water from pool covers.
- ◆ Change the water in bird baths at least once a week.
- ◆ Turn over plastic wading pools and wheelbarrows when not in use.
- ◆ Eliminate any standing water that collects on your property.
- ◆ Remind or help neighbors to eliminate breeding sites on their properties.

Please Note: Some local hardware stores may carry a product called Mosquito Dunk that contains a larvicide - *Bacillus thuringiensis israelensis* (BTI) - for use in areas of standing water around the home. The Health Department recommend eliminating standing water around the home to reduce breeding sites for mosquitoes and warns

that direct handling of larvicides may cause skin and eye irritation. If these products are purchased for home use, we recommend careful reading of the hazards label, directions and details regarding storage and handling.

Q: If I live in an area where birds or mosquitoes with West Nile virus have been reported, and I am bitten by a mosquito, am I likely to get sick?

A: No. Even in areas where mosquitoes do carry the virus, very few mosquitoes - less than 1%-- are infected. The chances that any one bite will be from an infected mosquito are very small.

Q: I've gotten a mosquito bite. Should I be tested for West Nile virus?

A: No. Most mosquitoes are not infected with West Nile virus. Illnesses related to mosquito bites are rare. However, you should see a doctor immediately if you develop symptoms such as high fever, confusion, muscle weakness, severe headaches, stiff neck, or if your eyes become sensitive to light. Patients with mild symptoms should recover completely, and do not require any specific medication or laboratory testing.

Q: Should I report dead birds to the Health Department?

A: The Health Department is taking reports on dead bird sightings. Please report any birds that do not have an obvious cause of death, such as injuries from power lines, collisions with cars, or gunshots. When you call, you will be asked for the date you saw the bird(s), the number of birds, a description of the bird(s), and your address. Your information will be combined with reports from throughout Georgia so we may detect the presence of West Nile virus early if it does appear in our state.

While the Health Department is interested in collecting information about dead birds as part of its efforts to understand West Nile virus, we will not be picking up *every* dead bird reported. However, we encourage all residents to report all dead bird sightings to assist the department's monitoring efforts.

If you do not receive a phone call from the Health Department environmentalist to arrange pick up of the dead bird within 24 hours of making the report or by the next business day, please dispose of the dead bird. West Nile virus cannot spread directly from birds to people however dead birds should not be handled with bare hands. **Use gloves to carefully place dead birds in a double plastic bag and then place the dead birds in the outdoor trash.**

For more information about West Nile virus, call your local Health Department or the Health District Epidemiology Unit at (706) 583-2868.