

West Nile Virus Disease Facts and Prevention Measures

West Nile virus is a disease that can be transmitted to humans by mosquitoes. It has been common in Africa, west Asia and the Middle East for decades. It first appeared in the US in 1999 in New York. It has since traveled westward across the country and now is in Colorado. Mosquito season in Colorado starts in the spring and ends in mid-September.

The West Nile virus is carried long distances by infected birds and then spread locally by mosquitoes that bite these birds. Infected mosquitoes can then bite and pass the virus to humans and animals, primarily birds and horses. There is a vaccine for horses, but none for humans. House pets do not spread the illness.

Health departments across the state are closely monitoring human and horse illnesses and tracking the virus by testing dead birds and trapping mosquitoes.

It is very rare to catch this illness, and most infected people will not get sick or will have only mild symptoms. However, in rare cases, West Nile virus can be fatal. West Nile virus can cause encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) and/or meningitis (inflammation of the brain's lining). However, most infections are mild and symptoms include fever, headache, body aches, and occasionally include skin rashes and swollen lymph nodes.

Symptoms generally appear 3 to 14 days after exposure. All residents of areas where West Nile virus activity has been confirmed could be at risk, but people over age 50 seem to be especially vulnerable to the severe forms of disease. In rare cases, it can be fatal.

More severe infections may include headache, high fever, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, muscle weakness or convulsions. Persons with these symptoms need to seek medical attention immediately.

Simple, yet effective, prevention measures can prevent mosquito bites

Even in areas where the virus is circulating, very few mosquitoes are infected and most are simply a nuisance, but not a health threat. Even if a mosquito is infected, the chances a person will become severely ill from any single mosquito bite are extremely small.

- Avoid mosquitoes by staying indoors at dawn and dusk when bugs are most active.
- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants while outdoors.
- Apply insect repellent that contains DEET. Follow directions carefully.
- Install or repair window and door screens to keep mosquitoes out.

Eliminate standing water to prevent mosquito-breeding areas

Mosquitoes lay up to 250 eggs at a time in still water, which hatch in 7 to 10 days. If standing water is removed weekly, many mosquitoes will be kept from breeding. The following tips help reduce the number of breeding mosquitoes around the house and lessen the need to use chemical pesticides against annoying adult mosquitoes:

- Remove standing water in ponds, ditches, clogged rain gutters, flowerpots, plant saucers, puddles, buckets and cans.
- Check for items that might hold water including wheelbarrows, tires, hubcaps, toys, garden equipment, pool covers, tarps, plastic sheeting, pipes, drains, flat roofs, boats, canoes and trash. Drill drainage holes in tire swings.
- Completely change water in birdbaths and wading pools weekly. Well-maintained swimming pools and spas are not a risk since pool chemicals kill any larvae.
- Stock ponds and fountains with fish that eat mosquito larvae.
- Use mosquito dunks in small ponds. Dunks are natural bacteria that kill mosquito larvae but are harmless to other animals, and are available at home and garden stores.

Testing of dead birds

Although birds infected with West Nile virus can die or become ill, most infected birds do survive. Mosquitoes can then spread the virus if they bite infected birds. Your local health department or animal control may need you to bring in dead birds early in mosquito season to test the bird for West Nile virus. Later in the season, some health departments may need to record the location of dead birds, but do not need the actual specimen for testing.

To be eligible for testing a dead bird must meet the following criteria:

1. The bird must be a member of the corvid family. This includes crows, ravens, magpies, and jays. Birds such as sparrows, starlings, pigeons, finches, robins, small blackbirds and songbirds will not be accepted for testing.
2. The bird must have been dead less than 48 hours, and should be bagged in plastic and refrigerated. Birds with automobile or gunshot wounds, or that are dried out, smelly or infested with maggots cannot be tested, and should be disposed of properly.
3. An exact location of where the bird was found must be reported.

There is no evidence that a person can get West Nile virus from handling live or dead birds. However, people should always avoid barehanded contact when handling any dead animal. Pick the carcass up with a shovel or gloved hands. Dispose of the bird by double bagging in plastic bags and placing in an outdoor trash receptacle.

For more information on West Nile virus visit www.fightthebitecolorado.com or call 303-692-2700.

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