

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.

What Are the Symptoms of WNV?

WNV affects the central nervous system. Symptoms vary.

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.

Milder Symptoms in Some People. Up to 20 percent of the people who become infected will display symptoms which can include 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 been sick for several weeks.

No Symptoms in Most People. Approximately 80 percent of people (about 4 out of 5) who are infected with WNV will 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 are WNV carriers that 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 through casual contact such as touching or kissing a person with the virus.

What Is the Risk of Getting Sick from WNV?

People over 50 at higher risk to get sick. 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 more time 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. If you have concerns, always consult your doctor.