



General Information

What is West Nile Virus (WNV) Encephalitis?

West Nile virus (WNV) encephalitis is a rare disease caused by a virus. WNV grows in birds, and is transmitted from bird to bird by infected mosquitoes. If mosquitoes infected with the virus bite horses or humans they can also become sick. The virus that causes WNV encephalitis occurs in Europe, Africa and Asia. It was first identified in the United States in New York during the summer of 1999. It is not known how WNV got to the U.S.

What are the symptoms of WNV Encephalitis?

Most WNV infections do not cause any symptoms. Mild WNV infections cause fever, headache and body aches, often with a skin rash and swollen lymph glands. In a small percentage of people infected by the virus the disease can be serious, even fatal. More severe infections can cause headache, high fever, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, paralysis, and sometimes death.

Persons older than 50 years of age have a higher risk of developing severe illness.

Is there treatment for WNV Encephalitis?

There is no treatment for WNV infection. Doctors can treat the symptoms of WNV encephalitis. However, approximately 10% of people who become sick enough from the infection to be hospitalized die from it.

How is WNV spread?

WNV is spread only by adult mosquitoes that are infected with the virus. Humans and horses that have WNV infection cannot spread the disease directly to humans. The risk of getting WNV encephalitis is highest from late July through September. There is no evidence that a person can get WNV from handling live or dead infected birds. Still, you should avoid bare-handed contact when handling dead animals, including birds. If you must handle dead birds, use gloves or double plastic bags. If you notice a dead bird in your area, call the Burlington County Health Department at (609) 265-5548. While most dead birds will not be collected and tested for WNV, keeping track of their locations plays an important role in directing further bird, mosquito and human surveillance activities. The information gathered from these surveillance activities may help to identify areas at increased risk for human WNV disease.

West Nile Virus is not spread from person to person

How common is WNV in New Jersey?

During 2004, one case of WNV infection was identified among residents of New Jersey. There were no confirmed cases of WNV in humans in Mercer County or Princeton in 2004. Additionally, WNV has been found in horses, mosquitoes and many species of birds throughout the state. The mosquitoes that carry this virus are common throughout the state.

What can you do to protect yourself?

There is no vaccine for WNV. The best way to protect yourself is to keep mosquitoes from biting you. Follow these steps every summer if you live in or visit an area with mosquitoes:

- Avoid outdoor activities between dusk and dawn, if possible, as this is the time of greatest mosquito activity.
- If you must be outdoors when mosquitoes are active, wear a long-sleeved shirt and long pants. Use a mosquito repellent that contains DEET (the chemical N-N-diethyl-metaltoluamide) and follow the directions on the label. DEET can be poisonous if overused. Never use DEET on infants. Avoid using repellents with DEET concentrations above 10 - 15% for children and with concentrations above 30-35% for adults. Cream, lotion or stick formulas are best for use on skin. Avoid products with high amounts of alcohol because these may be absorbed through the skin.
- Taking special care to cover up the arms and legs of children playing outdoors. When you bring a baby outdoors, cover the baby's carriage or playpen with mosquito netting.
- Fix any holes in your screens to make sure they are tightly attached to all your doors and windows.

What can you do to reduce the number of mosquitoes around your home and neighborhood?

To reduce mosquito populations around your home and neighborhood, get rid of any standing water that is available for mosquito breeding. Mosquitoes will breed in any puddle or standing water that lasts for more than four days. Here are some simple steps you can take:

- Dispose of or regularly empty any metal cans, plastic containers, ceramic pots and other water holding containers (including trash cans) on your property.
- Pay special attention to discarded tires that may have collected on your property. Stagnant water in tires is a common place for mosquitoes to breed.
- Drill holes in the bottom of recycling containers that are left outdoors, so that water can drain out.
- Clean clogged roof gutters; remove leaves and debris that may prevent drainage of rainwater.
- Turn over plastic wading pools and wheelbarrows when not in use.
- Do not allow water to stagnate in birdbaths; aerate ornamental ponds or stock them with fish.
- Keep swimming pools clean and properly chlorinated; remove standing water from pool covers.
- Use landscaping to eliminate standing water that collects on your property.

For more information contact:

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/>
- The Princeton Health Department at (609) 497-7608
- The New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services (NJDHSS) at (609) 588-7465 or on the NJDHSS website at <http://www.state.nj.us/health>