

What is West Nile virus?

The West Nile virus infection is spread by the bite of infected mosquitoes. Most of the time, the virus causes a mild illness but may also produce encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord) or polio-like paralysis.

What are the symptoms of West Nile virus?

Symptoms generally appear about 2 to 14 days after exposure. In some persons, especially those with weak immune systems, it can take as long as 21 days after exposure for symptoms to appear. On the other hand, healthy persons may not have any symptoms. The disease may be mild or serious. Mild illness includes fever, swollen lymph glands, muscle aches and sometimes a skin rash. In more severe cases of illness, the infection may spread to the nervous system or bloodstream. This can cause high fever, intense headache, a stiff neck and confusion. Serious illness can result in encephalitis or meningitis.

How is West Nile virus infection spread?

The bite of an infected mosquito is the most common way West Nile virus is spread. Mosquitoes become infected after biting a bird that carries the virus. West Nile virus is not spread from person to person. It is not spread directly from birds to humans. Blood transfusions and organ transplants have caused some infections. It is unclear whether an infected mother may transmit the virus to her unborn or nursing children.

How long are people contagious?

People are not contagious.

Who gets West Nile virus?

Anyone can get West Nile virus, but persons 50 years and older are at greater risk. A person who gets West Nile virus probably cannot get it again.

What treatment is available for people with West Nile virus?

There is no specific treatment. Since West Nile infection is not caused by bacteria, antibiotics will not work to treat the patient. Instead, doctors will try to reduce the symptoms with other medicines. Most people recover from this illness. There is no vaccine for humans.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

Since persons with West Nile virus cannot spread it to other persons, they can return to work or school as soon as they feel well enough.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting West Nile virus?

Protect against mosquito bites in the following ways:

- Wear long, loose and light-colored clothing.
- Reduce your time outdoors when mosquitoes are biting (e.g., night time).
- Use insect repellent. Follow the product's directions for use.
- Use screens on windows and doors in your house.

Control the mosquito population:

- Turn over or do away with containers (e.g. potted plant trays, old tires, and toys) in your yard where water might collect.
- Clean out birdbaths and wading pools at least one time a week.
- Get rid of standing water on tarps or flat roofs.
- Clean roof gutters and downspout screens.

Do not handle dead birds with your bare hands. Wear gloves and either throw the dead bird away or bury it. Wash hands frequently with water and soap. (Sanitizing gel may be substituted when hands are not visibly soiled.)