



West Nile virus

www.westnilevirus.gc.ca



Canada

What is West Nile Virus?

West Nile (WN) virus is transmitted by mosquitoes. Mosquitoes get infected when they bite an infected bird. An infected mosquito can spread the virus to people, birds, and animals by biting them.

How is WN virus spread?

Most people infected with WN virus get it from the bite of an infected mosquito. It is also possible to get the virus from a blood transfusion or an organ or tissue transplant, but this does not happen often. There have only been a few confirmed cases of people getting WN virus this way. In 2002, there was one case where a pregnant woman passed WN virus to her unborn baby. It might also be possible for the virus to pass through breast milk. Researchers are still looking into this.

A test to check donated blood for WN virus is now in place. Anyone who needs a blood transfusion should remember that the risk of getting WN virus this way is very low. There is no risk of getting West Nile virus when you give blood.

Also, there is no evidence that you can get WN virus by:

- touching or kissing someone who is infected
- being around a health care worker who has treated an infected person
- being around infected animals, unless there is blood-to-blood contact

What are the chances of getting sick from WN virus?

For most people, the chance of getting sick from WN virus is small. Usually, less than 1% of mosquitoes in a given area where WN virus is active are likely to be infected. This means the risk of a bite from an infected mosquito is low. Also, most people who get infected do not become seriously ill. It is believed less than 1% of persons infected with West Nile virus will develop serious illness.

This can include anyone, regardless of age or health status, but the risk increases as you get older. People with weaker immune systems and people with chronic diseases such as diabetes are also at greater risk for serious health effects. That is why it is so important to avoid mosquito bites, especially if WN virus is found in your community.

How do I know if I have WN virus?

Many infected people have no symptoms at all and do not get ill. Others may have mild symptoms that seem like the flu. Mild symptoms can include fever, headache, being very tired, and body aches.

In serious cases, the symptoms of WN virus infection can include:

- very bad headache
- high fever
- stiff neck

- feeling sick to your stomach
- vomiting
- feeling drowsy
- blurred vision or eyesight getting worse
- feeling confused
- muscle weakness and reduced muscle coordination

If you have any of these problems, you should call or visit a nurse or doctor right away.

Is there treatment for people who are sick with WN virus?

There is no specific treatment, medicine or cure for WN virus. People with serious illness may need hospital or nursing care. This can ease some of their symptoms and help them feel more comfortable. It can also help prevent them from developing other health problems while they are sick with WN virus.

Can I get WN virus from eating birds or animals that are infected with WN virus?

There is no evidence that people can get WN virus from eating infected birds or animals that are fully cooked.

Insect repellent tips

Always read and follow the directions on the container, especially when using on young children. Don't put on repellent unless you are going outdoors.

- You only need a thin layer of repellent, and you don't need it on skin covered by clothing. Put it on skin surfaces that are not covered. Put some on your clothing too.
- Do not use the repellent on open wounds, or on skin that is sore or sunburned.
- Do not use repellents containing DEET on infants under 6 months. For children between 6 months and 2 years, use only if there is a serious health risk to the child from insect bites, and then only once a day (10% DEET or less). For children 2-12 years, use no more than 3 times a day (10% DEET or less). Avoid using over a long time period.
- Wash treated skin with soap and water when you return indoors or when protection is no longer needed.
- Do not put repellent on children's faces and hands. This will reduce their chances of getting it in their eyes and mouths.

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What can I do to protect myself and my family?

For more information on WN virus, contact your Community Health Centre or Nursing Station. You can also visit Health Canada's West Nile virus Web site at:

www.westnilevirus.gc.ca

or call 1-800-816-7292 (toll free).

PROTECT yourself from mosquito bites

The best way to reduce the risk of infection is to reduce the risk of mosquito bites.

- When you go outside, wear loose fitting, long-sleeved tops and pants. Wear socks and a hat or cap. Stick with light colours. They are less likely to attract mosquitoes.
- Try to stay indoors at dawn and dusk, when mosquitoes are most active.



- When you are going to be around mosquitoes, use an insect repellent that contains DEET, the active ingredient in many insect repellents, or other approved ingredients. Always follow the directions on the container. Also, wear a mosquito net over your hat or cap to protect your head, face and neck.

- Check the door and window screens in your home. Fix any holes. Check screens in tents and camping/hunting shelters too.

REDUCE mosquito breeding areas

Mosquitoes breed in standing water. They only need a small amount. You can help reduce the number of mosquitoes around your home and community by getting rid of breeding areas. For example:

- Remove or dry out standing water that collects in pools, old tires, rainwater tanks, children's toys, and other outdoor objects.
- Store outdoor items, such as boats and wading pools, upside down.

- Replace water in outdoor pet dishes and other such containers at least twice a week.



REPORT dead birds

Finding a dead bird that tests positive for West Nile virus is one of the signs that West Nile virus has spread to an area. When birds in the area have WN virus, it means the people are at risk for infection.

- You can report any dead birds (crows, jays, magpies and ravens as these birds are more susceptible to getting sick and dying from WN virus) in your area by contacting your Community Health Centre or Nursing Station. They will arrange to have the birds removed and tested for WN virus.

- Do not touch dead or sick birds unless you are wearing rubber or latex gloves, and make sure any open wounds on your hands are covered. Warn your children about this too. Wash your gloved hands and then your bare hands well after handling.



AVOID blood-to-blood contact with wild animals

If you hunt or skin wild animals, remember that WN virus can spread through blood-to-blood contact. Always wear gloves when you handle dead animals, and make sure any open wounds on your hands are covered. Wash your gloved hands and then your bare hands well after handling any dead animal. This will help protect you from any disease the animal may have.



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