

West Nile Virus

What is West Nile virus?

West Nile virus (WNV) is a mosquito borne infection that is usually spread between mosquitoes and birds. Mosquitoes can become carriers of the virus after biting birds carrying the virus.

How do you get West Nile virus?

Humans become infected mostly through bites from mosquitoes carrying the virus.

Most people infected with WNV will not get sick at all. About 20 per cent of people will have a mild to moderate illness that starts 3-14 days after being infected. Symptoms may include fever, headache, body aches, fatigue, swollen lymph glands and sometimes a rash on the body. These symptoms generally last about a week but can last longer.

In rare cases – less than 1 per cent – WNV infection can result in more serious illness such as meningitis, which is inflammation of the lining of the brain, or encephalitis, which is inflammation of the brain, or polio-like paralysis. People with more serious illness may have high fever, headache, confusion, weakness, and sometimes paralysis. It may rarely result in death. If you develop a severe headache or neck stiffness for which you cannot find a cause, or other symptoms of WNV, consult your doctor.

What is the treatment for West Nile virus?

Although there is no specific treatment, medication or cure, many of the symptoms and complications of WNV can be treated. Most people who are infected with WNV get better. There is no human vaccine for WNV at this time.

Where is West Nile virus found?

West Nile virus is found in many parts of Africa, Western Asia and the northern Mediterranean area.

The first outbreak of WNV in North America was in 1999. WNV has been found in dead birds, mosquitoes, and horses, as well as people in most US states and across central and western Canada.

What is the risk of West Nile virus in BC?

West Nile virus has spread across North America since 1999. There are many species of mosquitoes but only a small number of species can carry and transmit WNV. The mosquitoes that can carry WNV are present in BC. Public health officials will notify the public of the risk if birds or mosquitoes are found in the province carrying the virus. The risk may vary by region of the province during the summer and depends on climate conditions.

How can I protect myself?

Any activity that prevents mosquitoes from biting or breeding will help to reduce the risk of infection with WNV. There are many simple things that you can do to protect yourself from WNV:

- **Use mosquito repellent** – Applying a mosquito repellent to areas of exposed skin is an excellent way to prevent mosquito bites. Check the product label for instructions on proper use. For more information about insect repellents, see BC HealthFile [#96 Insect Repellents and DEET](#).
- **Wear protective clothing** – Avoid dark clothing, as it tends to attract mosquitoes. If you are in an area with lots of mosquitoes, wear loose fitting, full-length pants and a long-sleeved shirt to keep mosquitoes from biting. Mosquitoes that can carry WNV are most active at dusk and at dawn. Avoid wearing floral fragrances such as perfumes, soaps, hair care products, and lotions.
- **Install mosquito screens on windows** – If you are in an area where many mosquitoes carry WNV, spend more time in well screened or enclosed, air-conditioned areas. Consider staying indoors at dawn and dusk and in the early evening.
- **Prevent mosquito breeding around your home** – Anything that can hold water is a likely mosquito breeding area. Try to identify and remove these areas on your property. A few things to do include: empty saucers under flowerpots; change water in bird baths regularly; unclog rain gutters; drain tarps, tires, and other debris where rain water may

collect; and install a pump in ornamental ponds or stock them with fish. Stagnant backyard pools can be a big source of mosquitoes and should be maintained regularly to prevent mosquito growth.

Why are dead crows being tested?

Many types of birds can be infected with WNV. However, birds in the corvid family, including crows, blue jays and magpies, are very sensitive and likely to die from the virus. Officials test dead corvids to find out if WNV has moved into an area.

Each health authority has a program in place for collecting and testing samples of dead corvids. The public can report dead crows to their local health authority. Dead bird sightings can also be reported on the BC Centre for Disease Control Web site at www.cw.bc.ca/cdc/westNile/wnv_form.asp.

While all birds reported on the Web site will not be picked up for testing, health authorities will be tracking the number of dead crows reported to help assess the risk of WNV. If you have questions about how dead crows are being collected in your area, please contact your local health authority.

Could handling a dead bird infect me?

While the risk of infection from handling birds is very low, the public should not handle wild birds or other animals, dead or alive, with their bare hands. If you need to move a dead bird, the following precautions should be taken:

- Do not touch dead or live birds with your bare hands.
- Use a shovel to pick up the dead bird and place it in double garbage bags being careful not to puncture the garbage bags.
- If you do not have a shovel:
 - Use heavy-duty, leak-proof rubber gloves, as used in house cleaning, or use several leak-proof plastic bags as a glove.
 - Grasp the bird with your hand protected by several layers of leak-proof plastic bags and then turn the bags inside out over the bird so the bird is inside the bag. Be careful not to touch the bird and keep your hands outside the bag.
 - Handle the bird so that the beak or claws do not puncture the bag or gloves. Ensure the bird is double bagged.

- Make sure you and your clothing do not contact the bird or its blood, secretions or feces.
- Dispose of the bird according to local bylaws.
- Always wash your hands after disposal of any dead animal, even though gloves were used.

For more information

- BC Centre for Disease Control
www.bccdc.org/content.php?item=183
- To contact your local health authority, visit the BC HealthGuide Web site at: www.bchealthguide.org/bcauthorities.stm or look in the blue pages of your local telephone book.
- Office of the BC Provincial Health Officer
www.healthservices.gov.bc.ca/pho/wnv.html
- Health Canada www.westnilevirus.gc.ca, or call 1-800-816-7292



BC Centre for Disease Control
AN AGENCY OF THE PROVINCIAL HEALTH SERVICES AUTHORITY

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www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm,
or visit your local public health unit.

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