

West Nile Virus- Factsheet

What is West Nile virus?

West Nile virus infection is spread by the bite of infected mosquitoes. Most of the time, the virus causes a mild illness. Rarely it can cause encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord) or paralysis.

What are the symptoms of West Nile virus?

Symptoms usually begin about 2 to 14 days after exposure. In some people, 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 people may not have any symptoms. The disease can be mild or serious. Mild illness includes fever, muscle aches, fatigue, and sometimes a skin rash. In more severe cases of illness, the infection may spread to the nervous system. 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. The risk of an infected mother spreading West Nile virus to her fetus or through breastfeeding is very low.

How long are people contagious?

People are not contagious.

Who gets West Nile virus?

Anyone can get West Nile virus, but people 50 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 virus 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 people with West Nile virus cannot spread it to other people, 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, especially at dawn and dusk.
- Use insect repellent. Follow the product's directions for use.

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 once a week.
- Get rid of standing water (e.g. 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.)