

Kent County Health Department West Nile Virus (WNV) Fact Sheet



What is West Nile Virus?

West Nile virus is a potentially serious illness. It was first found in the U.S. in 1999 in New York City. Since then, it has spread to most states including Michigan.

How is West Nile Virus spread?

West Nile virus is spread by the bite of a mosquito with the virus. Mosquitoes get West Nile virus from biting a bird that has the virus in its blood. After 10 to 14 days, the mosquito can then give the virus to people, birds, or other animals by biting them.

Can West Nile Virus be spread from person to person?

West Nile virus is not spread person-to-person like a cold. It has been spread from a pregnant mother to her baby, and through breast milk, blood transfusions and organ transplants.

How soon do infected people get sick?

People may get sick three to 14 days after a bite from a mosquito carrying the virus.

What are the symptoms of West Nile Virus?

Most people who get West Nile virus will not have any symptoms – they won't even know they have it. A small number of people who get West Nile virus will get a mild illness with:

- Fever
- Headache
- Body aches
- Sometimes a skin rash
- Sometimes swollen glands

There are no known long-term effects from a mild illness.

West Nile virus can cause a severe illness known as West Nile encephalitis. Encephalitis is a swelling of the brain that may include:

- Headache
- High fever
- Stiff neck
- Stupor
- Disorientation
- Coma
- Tremors
- Convulsions
- Muscle weakness
- Paralysis

A small number of these illnesses have been deadly. But, people do not often get West Nile encephalitis.

If you think you or any of your family members have symptoms of West Nile virus you should talk to your doctor. If you have any symptoms like fever, confusion, muscle weakness and severe headaches, see your doctor right away.

Who is at most risk for getting West Nile Virus?

All people living in areas where the virus has been active, including Michigan, are at risk for West Nile virus. The risk is mainly during the summer months. The risk of the more severe form of the disease (West Nile encephalitis) is highest for people 50 years of age and older.

How is West Nile Virus treated?

There is no cure for West Nile virus infection. Various treatments can improve symptoms. People with the more severe illness should see a doctor and in some cases may need to stay in the hospital for supportive care.

West Nile Virus (WNV) Fact Sheet – page 2

How can I protect myself from getting West Nile Virus?

Try not to get bitten by a mosquito:

- Wear bug spray, lotion or gel with DEET (N, N-diethyl-3-methylbenzamide) when you go outdoors. Common products with DEET include Off, DEET, and Cutter. The more DEET in a product the longer it works. Higher levels of DEET do not work better. Products with 10-35% DEET will do a good job for adults.

When using bug sprays, lotions or gels:

- Always follow the directions on the product label.
- Only use on exposed skin. Do not use under clothing.
- Do not use on cuts or sores.
- Spray onto hands first and then rub hands over your face. Do not spray on the face.
- When using on children, only use products with 10% or less of DEET. Put repellent on your hands first and then use your hands to put it on the child. Never use on children's hands because they often put their hands in their mouths.
- After coming inside, wash skin with soap and water or bathe.
- When you can, wear clothes long sleeves, long pants and socks while outdoors. You can also spray your clothing with a bug repellent since mosquitoes may bite through thin clothing. Wear light-colored clothing since mosquitoes like dark colors.
- Put mosquito netting over baby carriers and strollers when babies are outdoors.
- Do not use strong smelling perfumes shampoos, or hair sprays. Mosquitoes like strong smells.
- Try to stay indoors at dawn, dusk and during the early evening. These are the times when mosquitoes are most likely to bite you. Also, try to stay away from

areas where there are a lot of mosquitoes.

- Make sure your window and door screens do not have any holes where mosquitoes can get in to the house. If you do not have screens, get them.
- Mosquitoes can follow people into buildings or come in on pets. Make sure your pets are free of mosquitoes when letting them into the house.

Try to lower the number of mosquito breeding areas around your home:

- Keep your lawn and shrubs cut.
- Change the water in your bird bath twice a week.
- Empty and clean children's wading pools twice a week.
- Empty and refill pet water bowls every day.
- Cover trash bins to keep them from filling with water.
- Get rid of things in your yard that can collect water (jars, bottles, old tires, etc.).
- Clean leaves and sticks out of eaves troughs/rain gutters and check them often.
- Store boats and canoes upside down so they do not collect and hold rain water.
- Drain or fill any low areas in your yard where water stands for five or more days.

How do I report dead or dying birds to the Health Department? Call the Kent County Health Department at (616) 632-7131 if you see any dead or dying birds. Do not touch the birds, or any dead animal with your bare hands. Use gloves or an inside-out plastic bag to pick the animal up to put in the trash. **Do not** bring any dead birds or other dead animals to the health department. You can also report dead birds online at www.accesskent.com/westnile.