



WEST NILE VIRUS FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Provided by the California Department of Health Services



1. *What is West Nile Virus?*

West Nile Virus is a disease-causing agent commonly found in Africa, West Asia, and the Middle East. West Nile Virus is transmitted by mosquitoes and can infect humans, birds, horses, and many other animals.

2. *When was West Nile Virus first found in the United States?*

West Nile Virus was first detected in North America in New York City in 1999. Since then, the virus has spread to 44 states and the District of Columbia.

3. *Has West Nile Virus been found in California?*

One human case of infection with West Nile Virus was found in 2002 in Los Angeles County. The person became ill in August, and had not traveled to any part of the United States where West Nile Virus was present. There was no other evidence of West Nile Virus activity in California in 2002, despite increased surveillance efforts. Based on the rapid spread of West Nile Virus across the United States, public health officials expect that West Nile Virus will arrive and become established in California in the summer of 2003.

4. *How many human cases of West Nile illness were found in 2002 in the United States?*

Over 4,000 human cases were detected. The upper midwest and southeastern United States had the most reported cases.

5. *How do people get West Nile Virus?*

West Nile Virus is typically spread to humans by the bite of an infected mosquito.

6. *What kind of disease is caused by West Nile Virus?*

- West Nile fever (flu-like symptoms that last only a few days).
- West Nile encephalitis (swelling of the brain).
- West Nile meningitis (swelling of the membrane around the brain and spinal cord).
- West Nile meningoencephalitis (swelling of the brain and the membrane surrounding it).

7. *What are the symptoms of infection with West Nile Virus?*

Most people who are bitten by a mosquito infected with West Nile Virus will not get sick. Approximately 5-15% of individuals will experience mild symptoms including headache, high fever, and fatigue. Less than 1% of individuals infected will become seriously ill with meningitis or encephalitis. Symptoms of meningitis and encephalitis are extremely variable but can include stiff neck, personality change, paralysis, seizures, and coma. Some people develop severe muscle weakness or paralysis.

8. *Can people die from West Nile Virus?*

West Nile Virus infections can occasionally lead to death. In 2002, 284 people died, representing about 7% of the diagnosed West Nile Virus cases found in the United States. Elderly people are especially at risk of becoming very ill.

9. *Is there a treatment for West Nile Virus?*

There is no specific treatment for WNV infection or a vaccine to prevent it. Treatment of severe illnesses includes hospitalization to provide intensive supportive care, such as intravenous fluids and nutrition, respiratory support, and prevention of secondary infections. Persons who have symptoms suggesting severe illness should seek medical care as soon as possible.

9. *Can I get West Nile Virus from other people?*

West Nile Virus is usually transmitted to people by the bite of an infected mosquito. However in 2002, there was evidence that West Nile Virus can be acquired via a blood transfusion or organ transplant from an infected donor.

10. *What can I do to protect myself from West Nile Virus?*

- Avoid being outside when mosquitoes are most active, especially at dawn and dusk.
- When outdoors, wear protective clothing such as long pants and long sleeved shirts.
- Apply mosquito repellent according to label instructions.
- Make sure that doors and windows have tight fitting screens. Repair or replace screens that have tears or holes.
- Eliminate all sources of standing water that can support mosquito breeding.

11. *Which mosquito repellent works best?*

The most effective repellents use DEET. Products containing DEET are very safe when used according to label directions. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends using products with a low concentration of DEET, 10% or less, on children aged 2 – 12 years.

12. Can my horse or pets get West Nile Virus?

Horses can potentially become sick with West Nile Virus disease if an infected mosquito bites them. Signs in horses may include stumbling, weakness or paralysis of the limbs, circling, inability to stand, tremors, and death. A West Nile Virus vaccine is available for horses and horse owners should consult with their veterinarian about vaccinating their horses. Pet birds may also become sick with West Nile Virus. To date, there is no evidence that dogs and cats become ill from the Virus.

13. What steps has California taken to prepare for the introduction and establishment of West Nile Virus?

- In 2000, the existing mosquito-borne virus surveillance program was expanded to include testing of humans, horses, mosquitoes, and sentinel chickens for West Nile Virus.
- In 2000, California started a statewide program to look for birds that have died from West Nile Virus infection. Evidence of the virus in dead birds is often the first sign that West Nile Virus has been introduced into a new region.
- In 2000, [California Department of Health Services \(DHS\)](#) formed an interagency West Nile Virus Steering Committee to ensure collaboration between key agencies and to coordinate surveillance activities.
- The DHS set up a hotline for the public to report dead birds: **877-WNV-BIRD**. To report dead birds online, visit <http://westnile.ca.gov/deadbird.cfm>
- DHS launched a website to provide California-specific information on WNV and published a "California Mosquito-borne Virus Surveillance and Response Plan" available at <http://www.westnile.ca.gov/>
- DHS has worked with California physicians and county health officials to provide testing for suspect human cases.

14. Should the public report all dead birds by calling 877-WNV-BIRD?

The public is encouraged to assist in the efforts to detect West Nile Virus by contacting the Ventura County Environmental Health Division's **West Nile Virus hotline at (805) 658-4310** or website if they find a crow, raven, magpie, jay, or hawk that has been dead for about a day. If the bird meets the testing criteria, it will be picked up for testing by a local agency representative.

15. Can I get West Nile Virus from handling a dead bird?

No, but because birds can die from many causes, it is best to use gloves or a plastic bag to handle a dead bird for disposal in the trash can. Dead birds that meet the criteria for West Nile Virus testing should not be moved because they will be picked up by a local agency representative.

16. Are there ongoing mosquito control programs in California?

Over 70 local agencies, including mosquito and vector control districts, environmental health departments, and county health departments, conduct regular mosquito surveillance and control throughout California. Personnel from these agencies are certified and trained to conduct safe and effective mosquito control practices.

17. How is mosquito control conducted?

- Mosquito control programs include non-chemical forms of prevention and control, as well as ground and aerial application of mosquito control products.
- Most local mosquito control agencies target the immature stages of the mosquito that live in water. This approach prevents the mosquito from becoming a biting adult, capable of transmitting disease.
- Adult mosquito control may be required to suppress populations of infected mosquitoes and stem a disease outbreak.
- Pesticides used for mosquito control have been evaluated for this use by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and found to pose minimal risks to human health and the environment when used according to label directions.

If you have additional questions regarding West Nile Virus, please refer to “Questions and Answers” provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at the following website: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/q&a.htm>