Indiana State Department of Health | Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About… West Nile Virus

What is West Nile virus?

West Nile virus is a mosquito-borne virus that may cause encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) and meningitis (inflammation of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord). The reservoir (where the virus normally lives and multiples) is wild birds. This virus was known to be present in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, but had not been found in the Americas prior to 1999. The virus was discovered in New York the summer of 1999 and has since spread across the United States. West Nile virus was first identified in birds in Indiana the summer of 2001 and in humans the summer of 2002.

How is West Nile virus spread?

Mosquitoes transmit the disease to humans by biting an infected bird, and then biting a human. Humans that are bitten by an infected mosquito may show symptoms 3 to 15 days after being bitten.

Who is at risk for West Nile virus?

All residents that sustain a mosquito bite are at risk of getting West Nile encephalitis; persons over 50 years of age have the highest risk of developing severe disease.

What are the symptoms of West Nile virus?

Most people who get infected with West Nile virus will have no symptoms or mild symptoms. A few individuals will have a more severe form of the disease; encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) or meningitis (inflammation of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord).

Symptoms that may be present are: high fever, headache, neck stiffness, muscle weakness or paralysis, and confusion. Most people have very mild disease. West Nile virus has been reported in people ranging from nine months to 94 years old, but more severe disease is likely in individuals over 50 years of age, or those with weak immune systems.

How do I know if I have West Nile virus?

You cannot tell without seeing your doctor. Your physician will complete a thorough physical examination and laboratory testing to confirm whether or not you have West Nile virus.

How can West Nile virus be treated?

There is no specific treatment, but supportive care is provided as with other severe viral illnesses.

How is West Nile virus prevented?

Transmission of West Nile virus can be avoided by preventing mosquito bites. To prevent mosquito bites, avoid being outdoors during prime mosquito biting times, particularly dusk to dawn. If you cannot avoid being outdoors during these times then apply insect repellent containing DEET, Picardin, or oil of lemon eucalyptus to clothes and exposed skin; and wear long-sleeved shirts and pants. You can also protect your family and your community by reducing the amount of standing water available for mosquito breeding in or near your property.

- Discard old tires, tin cans, plastic containers, ceramic pots or other unused containers that can hold water;
- Repair failed septic systems;
- Drill holes in the bottom of recycling containers left outdoors;
- Keep grass cut short and shrubbery trimmed;
- Clean clogged roof gutters, particularly if leaves tend to plug up the drains;
- Flush ornamental fountains and birdbaths periodically; and
- Aerate ornamental pools, or stock them with predatory fish.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to:

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/index.htm

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