



Environmental Health

West Nile Virus FAQs

What is West Nile Virus?

West Nile virus (WNV) is a potentially serious illness. Experts believe WNV is established as a seasonal epidemic in North America that flares up in the summer and continues into the fall. This FAQ contains important information that can help you recognize and prevent West Nile virus.



What Can I Do to Prevent WNV?

The easiest and best way to avoid WNV is to prevent mosquito bites. Mosquitoes lay their eggs in standing water. Weeds, tall grass, and bushes provide an outdoor home for the adult *Culex pipiens* mosquito (the common house mosquito) which is most commonly associated with West Nile virus. *Culex* mosquitoes are most active at dusk and dawn. Consider the following for prevention measures:

- Wear long sleeves and pants at these times or consider staying indoors during these hours.
- Make sure you have good screens on your windows and doors to keep mosquitoes out.
- Get rid of mosquito breeding sites by emptying standing water from flower pots, buckets and barrels. Change the water in pet dishes and replace the water in bird baths weekly. Drill holes in tire swings so water drains out. Keep children's wading pools empty and on their sides when they aren't being used.
- Mosquitoes can enter homes through unscreened windows or doors, or broken screens.
- Remove all discarded tires from your property.
- Dispose of tin cans, plastic containers, ceramic pots, or similar water-holding containers.
- Make sure roof gutters drain properly. Clean clogged gutters in the spring and fall.
- Clean and chlorinate swimming pools, outdoor saunas and hot tubs. If not in use, keep empty and covered.
- Drain water from pool covers.
- Change the water in birdbaths at least once a week.
- Turn over plastic wading pools and wheelbarrows when not in use.
- Eliminate any standing water that collects on your property.
- Remind or help neighbors to eliminate breeding sites on their properties.

Some local hardware stores may carry a product called Mosquito Dunk that contains a larvicide – *Bacillus thuringiensis israelensis* (BTI) – for use in areas of standing water around the home. This is a naturally occurring bacteria.

The Summit County Public Health recommends eliminating standing water around the home to reduce breeding sites for mosquitoes and warns that direct handling of larvicides may cause skin and eye irritation. If any products are purchased for home use, we recommend careful reading of the hazards label, directions, and details regarding storage and handling.

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What Can I Do to Prevent WNV *continued?*

When you are outdoors, use insect repellents containing DEET. Follow the directions on the package. Use DEET according to manufacturer's directions.

- Do not use DEET on infants or pregnant women.
- Do not allow young children to apply DEET themselves.
- Do not apply DEET directly to children. Apply to your own hands and then put it on the child.
- DEET is effective for approximately four hours. Avoid prolonged or excessive use of DEET. Use sparingly to cover exposed skin and clothing.
- Wash all treated skin and clothing after returning indoors.
- Store DEET out of reach of children.

Note that Vitamin B, ultrasonic devices, incense and bug zappers have not been shown to be effective in preventing mosquito bites.

What are the Symptoms of WNV?

- Serious Symptoms in a Few People. Only about one in 150 people infected with WNV will develop severe illness. The severe symptoms can include high fever, headache, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness, vision loss, numbness and paralysis. These symptoms may last several weeks, and neurological effects may be permanent.
- Milder Symptoms in Some People. Up to 20 percent of the people who become infected have symptoms such as fever, headache, and body aches, nausea, vomiting, and sometimes swollen lymph glands or a skin rash on the chest, stomach and back. Symptoms can last for as short as a few days, though even healthy people have become sick for several weeks.
- No Symptoms in Most People. Approximately 80 percent of people (about 4 out of 5) who are infected with WNV will not show any symptoms at all.

How Does West Nile Virus Spread?

- Infected Mosquitoes. Most often, WNV is spread by the bite of an infected mosquito. Mosquitoes become infected when they feed on infected birds. Infected mosquitoes can then spread WNV to humans and other animals when they bite.
- Transfusions, Transplants, and Mother-to-Child. In a very small number of cases, WNV also has been spread through blood transfusions, organ transplants, breastfeeding and even during pregnancy from mother to baby.
- Not through touching. WNV is not spread through casual contact such as touching or kissing a person with the virus.

How Soon do Infected People Get Sick?

People typically develop symptoms between 3 - 14 days after being bitten by the infected mosquito.

How is WNV Infection Treated?

There is no specific treatment for WNV infection. In cases with milder symptoms, people experience symptoms such as fever and aches that pass on their own, although even healthy people have become sick for several weeks. In more severe cases, people usually need to go to the hospital where they can receive supportive treatment including intravenous fluids, help with breathing and nursing care.

What Should I do if I think I have WNV?

Milder WNV illness improves on its own, and people do not necessarily need to seek medical attention for this infection though they may choose to do so. If you develop symptoms of severe WNV illness, such as unusually severe headaches or confusion, seek medical attention immediately. Severe WNV illness usually requires hospitalization. Pregnant women and nursing mothers are encouraged to talk to their doctor if they develop symptoms that could be WNV.

What is the Risk of Getting Sick from WNV?

People over 50 are at higher risk to get severe illness. People over the age of 50 are more likely to develop serious symptoms of WNV if they do get sick and should take special care to avoid mosquito bites.

Being outside means you're at risk. The more time you're outdoors, the more time you could be bitten by an infected mosquito. Pay attention to avoiding mosquito bites if you spend a lot of time outside, either working or playing.

Risk through medical procedures is very low. All donated blood is checked for WNV before being used. The risk of getting WNV through blood transfusions and organ transplants is very small, and should not prevent people who need surgery from having it. If you have concerns, talk to your doctor.

Pregnancy and nursing do not increase risk of becoming infected with WNV. The risk that WNV may present to a fetus or an infant infected through breast milk is still being evaluated. Talk with your care provider if you have concerns.

If I Live in an Area Where Birds or Mosquitoes with WNV Have Been Reported, and I am Bitten by a Mosquito, am I Likely to get Sick?

No. Even in areas where mosquitoes do carry the virus, very few mosquitoes – less than 1% -are infected. The chances that any one bite will be from an infected mosquito are very small.

I've Gotten a Mosquito Bite. Should I be Tested for WNV?

No. Most mosquitoes are not infected with West Nile virus. Illnesses related to mosquito bites are rare. However, you should see a doctor immediately if you develop symptoms such as high fever, confusion, muscle weakness, severe headaches, stiff neck, or if your eyes become sensitive to light. Patients with mild symptoms should recover completely, and do not require any specific medication or laboratory testing.

If I Find a Dead Bird, What Should I Do?

If you find a dead bird don't handle the body with your bare hands. Contact Summit County Public Health (SCHP) for instructions on reporting and disposing of the body. SCHP is no longer collecting birds for West Nile Virus testing. SCHP is now concentrating its efforts on collecting mosquitoes to determine the level of activity for the West Nile Virus in Summit County. Further questions or concerns can be addressed by calling 330-926-5669.

Will the Public be Notified in Advance About Mosquito Spraying Activities for WNV?

Residents will learn about mosquito spraying schedules through the media, and Summit County Public Health mosquito spraying schedule phone line at 330-926-5667.

Summit County Public Health complies with applicable federal civil rights laws and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability or sex. This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

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Spanish: Atención: La asistencia de idiomas esta disponible. Nepali: भाषा सहायता उपलब्ध छ

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