

West Nile virus



What is West Nile virus?

West Nile virus is a mosquito-borne virus that can cause serious illness in humans. West Nile virus appeared in North America in 1999. The first known human case of West Nile virus in Ontario was reported in 2002.

How is West Nile virus spread?

West Nile virus is mainly passed to humans by the bite of an infected mosquito. Mosquitoes become infected when they bite an infected bird. The virus is not spread by person-to-person contact through touching, coughing, sneezing or drinking from the same cup.

Who is at risk for West Nile virus?

Everyone who is outside during the summer months is at risk and should take steps to prevent being bitten by mosquitoes.

People who have chronic illnesses and those over 50 years of age should take special care to avoid mosquito bites as they are at greater risk of developing serious illness if they are infected with West Nile virus.

The chances of being bitten by an infected mosquito are rare. Approximately four out of five people infected with West Nile virus do not show any signs of illness at all.

What are the symptoms of West Nile virus?

Those who do develop illness, may experience flu-like symptoms such as:

- fever
- muscle weakness
- stiff neck
- confusion
- severe headache
- sudden sensitivity to light

If you experience any of these symptoms, get medical attention. These may be symptoms of West Nile virus or other illness.

For a very rare few, the virus causes serious neurological illness including encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).

Is there a vaccine for West Nile virus?

Researchers are working hard to develop a vaccine to protect humans from West Nile virus. At this time, no vaccine is available.

How can I protect myself and my family?

There are simple steps that can be taken to prevent mosquito bites and reduce the chance of getting West Nile virus:

- Consider using insect repellent when outdoors.
- Cover up by wearing long sleeved shirts or jackets, long pants and socks.
- Avoid outdoor activity in the early morning and early evening when mosquitoes are most active.
- Clean up around your home by emptying containers where water collects, such as in old tires, flower pots, bird baths and wading pools. Mosquitoes like to breed in standing water.