



West Nile Virus

Frequently Asked Questions

What is West Nile virus?

West Nile virus is a mosquito-borne infection that can cause serious illness. Although the chances of a person getting sick are small, you can take some simple steps to reduce your risk of being bitten by mosquitoes.

What are the symptoms of West Nile virus?

Mild cases of West Nile infections might include a slight fever or headache. More severe infections are marked by a rapid onset of high fever with head and body aches, disorientation, tremors, convulsions and in the most severe cases, paralysis or death. Usually symptoms occur from 5 to 15 days after exposure. No specific treatment exists for viral infections, other than to treat the symptoms and provide supportive care.

Who is at highest risk for becoming seriously ill?

Persons who are at highest risk for serious illness are persons over the age of 50. Healthy children and adults are at very low risk for illness.

Do all mosquitoes transmit disease?

No. Most mosquitoes do not transmit disease. While more than 58 different species of mosquitoes exist in Mississippi, only certain species have been associated with West Nile virus.

Where do mosquitoes live and breed?

Mosquitoes lay their eggs in moist areas such as standing water. The eggs become larvae that remain in the water until the adults mature and fly off. Weeds, tall grass and shrubbery provide an outdoor home for adult mosquitoes. They can also enter houses through unscreened windows or doors or broken screens. Many mosquitoes will breed in containers that hold water, such as flowerpots or discarded tires.

When are mosquitoes most active?

Some mosquitoes are most active between dusk and dawn, when the air is calm. However, others will feed at any time of day.

What bird(s) can carry West Nile virus?

In Mississippi, most West Nile virus-positive birds have been blue jays and crows. House sparrows, cardinals (red birds) and raptors (hawks and owls) are also tested. The Mississippi Department of Health (MDH) is using dead crow and jay sightings to track West Nile virus, so it's important to report any dead birds to your local health department. Not all dead birds need to be tested for West Nile virus. Birds do not transmit West Nile virus to people, but people should wear gloves when handling any dead bird or mammal because of the possibility of other diseases.

Can my pet be infected?

There have been cases with dogs and cats, and some become ill, but usually do not die. Horses can become seriously ill, if infected. Birds and animals are not known to transmit the West Nile virus to people.

How can I protect my family and myself?

To reduce the mosquito population around your home and property, reduce or eliminate all standing water:

- Dispose of tin cans, plastic containers, ceramic pots or similar water-holding containers.
- Remove all discarded tires on your property. Used tires are very significant mosquito breeding sites.
- Drill holes in the bottoms of recycling containers that are kept outdoors.
- Make sure roof gutters drain properly, and clean clogged gutters in the spring and fall.
- Remove leaf debris.
- Turn over plastic wading pools and wheelbarrows when not in use.
- Change the water in birdbaths.
- Clean vegetation and debris from edges of ponds.
- Clean and chlorinate swimming pools, outdoor saunas and hot tubs.
- Drain water from pool covers.
- Use landscaping to eliminate standing water that collects on your property.

Should I stay indoors?

It is not necessary to limit all outdoor activity. However, you can and should try to reduce your risk of being bitten by mosquitoes. In addition to reducing standing water in your yard, make sure all windows and doors have screens and that all screens are in good repair. If West Nile virus is found in your area:

- Wear shoes, socks, long pants and a long-sleeved shirt outdoors when practical.
- When you are outdoors, use insect repellent containing an EPA-registered active ingredient. Follow the directions on the package.

What should I do about mosquito control problems?

Call your local city or county public works director, City Hall, or the Board of Supervisors.

What else can I do?

In addition to reducing potential breeding sites on your own property, you can encourage your neighbors, local businesses and municipal agencies to do so as well. You can also work with local service, labor, religious and fraternal organizations to promote community-wide clean-up drives. For more information on how you can help, contact your local health department or call:

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