

http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/infections/bacterial_viral/west_nile.html

West Nile Virus

Most mosquitoes are simply annoying. But a small percentage can carry diseases like West Nile virus. Over the past few years, cases of West Nile virus have been found in animals, birds, and humans in all continental states in the United States.

West Nile virus is transmitted to humans from the bite of mosquitoes that probably picked up the virus after feeding on infected birds. Pets and other animals can also become infected with West Nile virus. But you can't get the virus from touching (or other casual contact with) people or animals.

Most people are unlikely to become seriously ill from West Nile virus. In fact, someone who does get infected with West Nile virus may not even know it. That's because most people who do get the virus usually have few or no symptoms. A small number may have symptoms like those of the flu, such as fever and body aches. But they usually get better quickly.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) believes that, after becoming infected, a person becomes immune and won't get sick from the virus again.

A small number of people (less than 1%) who are infected with West Nile virus do become seriously ill, though. They are usually people over the age of 50 who are at greater risk of developing a more severe form of the infection, such as encephalitis or meningitis.

These more serious forms of infection can cause long-term illness, brain damage, permanent disability, and – in rare cases – even death. Symptoms usually begin 2 to 15 days after a person has been infected.

Severe West Nile virus infection causes symptoms such as:

- * high fever
- * very stiff neck and back (people are unable to bend their necks)
- * severe headache

- * confusion or disorientation
- * weak muscles
- * convulsions or seizures

People who think they may have symptoms of West Nile virus should see a doctor right away. Diagnosing the infection early can help improve a person's chances of recovery.

Tips for Protecting Yourself

Although it's unlikely you'll be infected with West Nile virus, mosquito bites can still be an itchy nuisance. The CDC advises people to protect themselves from mosquito bites by using mosquito repellent, especially at times when mosquitoes are most active, such as at dusk and dawn.

The CDC recommends mosquito repellents that include one of the following ingredients:

- * DEET (N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide) – those that contain between 10% and 30% of DEET are best
- * picaridin (KBR 3023)
- * oil of lemon eucalyptus (p-menthane 3,8-diol or PMD)

You should reapply these according to the directions on the product label, which is often not more than once a day. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for applying the product. Don't use a sunscreen that includes an insect repellent – sunscreen should be reapplied frequently but insect repellents should not.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) offers the following tips for using insect repellents:

- * Don't use insect repellent on skin that is already covered by clothing.
- * Don't spray products directly onto your face (spray the repellent onto your hands first and then rub it onto your face) and don't use repellent on your eyes or mouth.
- * Wash repellent off once you get back indoors.
- * Don't use repellent on areas of the skin that are irritated or cut.
- * Stop using a repellent if it gives you a rash or other skin reaction, wash it off, and call the doctor.
- * Don't let little kids touch the repellent.

You can also take the following precautions to avoid mosquito bites and West Nile virus:

- * Wear long-sleeved shirts and pants that cover your skin. You can now buy clothing that has been treated with an insect repellent called permethrin. (This repellent is meant for clothing, not for applying directly to the skin.) Manufacturers say that the insect repellent stays on the clothing even after it has been washed a couple of times.

- * Don't hang out near puddles or other pools of standing water like gutters or wading pools – they are common breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

- * Get rid of mosquito breeding sites by emptying standing water found in flower pots, buckets, old tires, etc.

- * If you find a dead bird, don't touch it with your bare hands or try to move it. Let your parents know so they can contact your local health department right away.

This information was compiled by

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