



West Nile Virus: Basic Questions and Answers

What is West Nile virus?

West Nile virus was first found in the U.S. in 1999 in New York City. Since then, it has spread to most states including Michigan. West Nile virus is spread by the bite of a mosquito that has the virus. Mosquitoes get West Nile virus from biting a bird that has the virus in its blood. After 10 to 14 days, the mosquito can then give the virus to people, birds, or other animals by biting them. West Nile virus is not spread person-to-person like a cold. But, it has been spread from a pregnant mother to her baby, and through breast milk, blood transfusions and organ transplants.

What are the symptoms of West Nile virus?

Most people who get West Nile virus will not have any symptoms – they won't even know they have it. Some people may get sick 3 to 14 days after a bite from a mosquito carrying the virus. A small number of people who get West Nile virus will get a mild illness with fever, head and body aches, and sometimes a skin rash and swollen glands. There are no known long-term effects from a mild illness.

West Nile virus can cause severe illness known as West Nile encephalitis or meningitis.



Symptoms include headache, high fever, stiff neck, disorientation, muscle weakness, coma, and convulsions. A small number of these illnesses have been deadly. But, people do not often get severe West Nile illness. Less than 1% of the people who get West Nile virus will develop a severe illness.



If you think you or any of your family members have any symptoms of West Nile virus you should talk to your doctor. If you have any symptoms like fever, confusion, muscle weakness and severe headaches, you should see your doctor right away.

Can West Nile virus be treated?

There is no treatment that is shown to work for West Nile virus infection. Most people recover on their own. Some people with more severe West Nile illness may need to see a doctor and in some cases may need to stay in the hospital.

Who is at risk for West Nile virus?

All people living in areas where the virus has been active are at risk for West Nile virus. Since West Nile virus has been active in Michigan, all people in Michigan are at risk mainly during the summer months. The risk of the more severe form of the disease (West Nile encephalitis) is highest for people 50 years of age and older. But, most people that get West Nile virus have no or mild symptoms.

How can I prevent West Nile virus?

Try to get fewer mosquito bites:

- ✓ Wear bug spray, lotion or gel with DEET (N, N-diethyl-3-methylbenzamide) when you go outdoors. Common bug sprays, lotions and gels with DEET include Off, DEET, Cutter, etc. The more DEET in a spray, lotion or gel, the longer it works. Higher levels of DEET do not work better. Sprays, lotions and gels with 10-35% DEET will do a good job for adults. But for children, only use products with 10% or less of DEET.



When using bug sprays, lotions or gels follow these instructions:

- Always follow the directions on the product label.
 - Only use on exposed skin. Do not use under clothing.
 - Do not use on cuts or sores.
 - Do not use on the eyes and mouth and do not spray on the face. Spray onto hands first and then rub hands over your face.
 - When using on children, put repellent on your hands first and then use your hands to put it on the child. Never use on children's hands because they often put their hands in their mouths.
 - After coming inside, wash skin with soap and water or bathe.
- ✓ When you can, wear clothes that cover the skin like long sleeves, long pants and socks while outdoors. You can also spray your clothing with bug spray since mosquitoes may bite through thin clothing.
 - ✓ Wear light-colored clothing since mosquitoes like dark colors.
 - ✓ Put mosquito netting over infant carriers and strollers when infants are outdoors.
 - ✓ Do not wear strong smelling perfumes or use strong smelling shampoos and hair sprays because mosquitoes like strong smells.
 - ✓ You may want to stay indoors at dawn, dusk and during the early evening. These are the times when mosquitoes are most likely to bite you. Also, try to stay away from activities in areas where there are a lot of mosquitoes.
 - ✓ Make sure that your window and door screens do not have any holes where mosquitoes can get in to the house. If you do not have screens, get them.
 - ✓ Mosquitoes can follow people into buildings or come in on pets so make sure your pets are free of mosquitoes when letting them into the house.

Try to lower the number of mosquito breeding areas around your home:



- ✓ Keep your lawn and shrubs cut.
- ✓ Change the water in your bird bath twice a week.
- ✓ Empty and clean children's wading pools a couple times a week.
- ✓ Empty and refill pet water bowls every day.
- ✓ Cover trash bins to keep them from filling with water.
- ✓ Get rid of things in your yard that can collect water (like jars, bottles, old tires, etc.).
- ✓ Clean leaves and sticks out of eaves troughs/rain gutters and check them often.
- ✓ Store boats and canoes upside down so they do not collect and hold rain water.
- ✓ Drain or fill any low areas in your yard where water stands for five or more days.



Report dead or dying birds to the health department:

Call the Kent County Health Department at (616) 336-3030 if you see any dead or dying birds. Do not touch the birds, or any dead animal with your bare hands. Use gloves or an inside-out plastic bag to pick the animal up to put in the trash. **Do not** bring any dead birds or other dead animals to the health department.

For more information call (616) 336-3030.

Information can also be found at www.accesskent.com/westnile