

West Nile virus

What is West Nile virus?

West Nile virus (WNV) is a disease usually spread between birds by mosquitoes. Mosquitoes can become carriers of the virus after biting birds infected with the virus. It is possible for people, horses and other animals to become infected if they are bitten by a mosquito carrying the virus.

What are the symptoms of West Nile virus?

Most people infected with WNV will not get sick. A few people will have a mild to moderate illness that starts 3 to 14 days after being infected.

Symptoms may include fever, headache, body aches, fatigue and sometimes a rash on the body. These symptoms generally last about 1 week, but they can last for several weeks or months.

In less than 1 per cent of people, WNV infection can result in more serious illnesses such as meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain), encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), or polio-like paralysis. People who have one of these more serious illnesses may also have high fever, severe headache, confusion and weakness.

In very rare cases, WNV infection can result in death. If you develop a severe headache or neck stiffness for which you cannot find a cause, or other symptoms of WNV, contact your health care provider.

What is the treatment for West Nile virus?

Many of the symptoms and complications of WNV can be treated, although there is no

specific treatment, medication or cure for the infection. Most people who are infected with WNV get better, but it may take several weeks or months to recover fully. There is no human vaccine for WNV at this time.

Where is West Nile virus found?

WNV is found in many parts of the world.

The first outbreak of WNV in North America was in New York City in 1999. Since then it has spread to all of the continental U.S. and across all provinces of Canada.

What is the risk of West Nile virus in B.C.?

There are many species of mosquitoes, but only a small number of these can carry and transmit the virus. Some of these are present in B.C.

However, the number of mosquitos infected with WNV in B.C. is low and the risk of WNV infection in people in B.C. is considered low.

How can I protect myself?

Any activity that prevents mosquitoes from biting or breeding will help to reduce the risk of infection with WNV. There are many simple things that you can do to protect yourself:

- Use mosquito repellent – Applying a mosquito repellent to areas of exposed skin is an excellent way to prevent mosquito bites. Check the product label for instructions on proper use. For more information about insect repellents, see [HealthLinkBC File #96 Insect repellents and DEET](#)
- Wear protective clothing – Avoid dark clothing as it tends to attract mosquitoes. If

you are in an area with lots of mosquitoes, wear full-length pants and a long-sleeved shirt to keep mosquitoes from biting. Mosquitoes that can carry WNV are most active in the evening and early morning, especially at dusk and dawn

- Install mosquito screens on windows – If you are in an area where there are many mosquitoes, spend more time in well-screened or enclosed areas. Consider staying indoors when mosquitoes are most active, which is from dusk to dawn
- Prevent mosquitoes from breeding around your home – Anything that can hold water is a likely mosquito breeding area. Identify and remove these areas on your property. A few actions to take include: empty saucers under flowerpots; change water in bird baths 2 times a week; unclog rain gutters; drain tarps, tires and other debris where rainwater may collect; and install a fountain in ornamental ponds or stock them with fish

Backyard pools can be a significant breeding source of mosquitoes and should be maintained regularly to prevent mosquito growth.

Could handling a dead bird infect me?

The risk of infection from handling birds is very low; however, you should not use your bare hands to handle wild birds or other animals (dead or alive). If you need to move a dead bird, the following precautions should be taken:

- Do not touch dead or live birds with your bare hands
- Use a shovel to pick up the dead bird, place it in double garbage bags and be careful not to puncture the garbage bags

- If you do not have a shovel:
 - Use heavy-duty, leak-proof rubber gloves similar to those used in house cleaning, or use several leak-proof plastic bags as a glove
 - Turn the plastic bag inside out over your hand, and grasp the bird, and then pull the bag out over the bird so the bird is inside the bag. Be careful not to touch the bird and keep your hands outside the bag. Handle the bird so its beak or claws do not puncture the gloves or bags
- Make sure you and your clothing do not contact the bird, its blood, or other body fluids or feces
- Dispose of the bird according to local bylaws
- Always wash your hands after disposal of any dead animal, even if you wear gloves

If you would like to report an unusual cluster of dead birds, please call the BC Interagency Wild Bird Mortality Investigation at 1-866-431-BIRD (2473). Reports will be recorded, assessed to determine if further investigation is warranted, and if so, guidance will be provided on a case-by-case basis.

For more information

- BC Centre for Disease Control: West Nile Virus (WNV)
www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/west-nile-virus-wnv
- Government of Canada: West Nile virus
www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/west-nile-virus.html



BC Centre for Disease Control
Provincial Health Services Authority

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/more/resources/healthlink-bc-files or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.