

# **WEST NILE VIRUS**

MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

## ***WHAT IS WEST NILE VIRUS (WNV)?***

West Nile virus is a **mosquito-carried virus** that usually causes mild or no illness in humans. In rare cases, WNV can cause encephalitis (swelling of the brain) or meningitis (swelling of the lining of the brain and spinal cord).

## ***IS WNV IN MASSACHUSETTS?***

**Yes.** WNV has been found in Massachusetts in birds, mosquitoes, horses and humans.

## ***HOW IS WNV SPREAD?***

WNV is most commonly spread to people by the **bite of an infected mosquito**. It may also be spread through blood transfusions or organ transplants. There are reports that WNV may be passed from pregnant or breastfeeding women to their babies. However, the risk to an unborn or breastfeeding baby is still unknown.

## ***SHOULD I REPORT DEAD BIRDS?***

No. Tracking and testing dead birds for WNV is no longer a useful way to find the virus. Mosquito collection and testing gives the most reliable indication of current WNV activity and this is where monitoring efforts will continue to be focused. Dead birds can be safely disposed of in the trash. Using gloves, a shovel or plastic bags covering your hands, the dead bird should be double-bagged and placed in the trash. You should then wash your hands.

## ***WHAT IS MY CITY OR TOWN DOING TO CONTROL MOSQUITOES?***

Mosquito control activities are conducted during the mosquito season in many communities. Call your local board of health (usually listed in the phone book under 'government') for information specific to your area.

## ***I'VE BEEN BITTEN BY A MOSQUITO. SHOULD I BE TESTED FOR WNV?***

No. **Illnesses caused by mosquito bites are very rare.** Very few mosquito bites carry any risk. People who are bitten by mosquitoes carrying the WNV will usually experience **no illness or very mild illness**. However, you should see a health care provider immediately if you develop symptoms such as:

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

Patients with mild symptoms usually recover completely and do not require any specific medication or laboratory testing. Less than 1% of people infected with

WNV develop serious illness. People older than 50 years of age have a higher risk of developing severe illness such as encephalitis.

### ***IS THERE TREATMENT OR A VACCINE FOR WNV?***

There is **no human vaccine or specific treatment** for WNV infection, but health care providers can treat the symptoms of WNV. In severe cases, hospitalization may be needed to provide supportive care.

### **Protect Yourself**

Your risk of getting ill from WNV is low, but you can lower your risk even more by trying to avoid mosquito bites. Here are some things you can do **to reduce your chances of being bitten by a mosquito**.

- Schedule outdoor events to avoid the hours between dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are most active.
- When you're outdoors, **wear a long-sleeved shirt, long pants and socks.**
- Use a **mosquito repellent** that contains DEET, picaridin, IR3535 or oil of lemon eucalyptus.
  - Products with permethrin may be used but should only be applied on clothing. Always follow the directions on the label.
  - DEET products should not be used on infants under 2 months of age. Children older than two months should use DEET concentrations of 30% or less.
  - Oil of lemon eucalyptus should not be used on children under three years of age.
- Make sure **window and door screens** do not have holes in them.

### **Remove Standing Water**

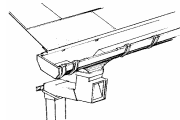
Mosquitoes grow in standing (stagnant) water. Getting rid of that water helps to lower the number of mosquitoes in your area. Look around outside your house for containers and other things that might collect water and turn them over, regularly empty them, or dispose of them.



Unused  
flower pots



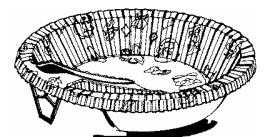
Trash cans  
and lids



Storm  
gutters



Tires



Wading  
pools

### **Questions?**

Call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Information Line at 1-866-MASS WNV (627-7968) or visit our web site: [www.mass.gov/dph](http://www.mass.gov/dph)