

Message to the West Nile Virus: “Bug Off!”



The mosquito is an insect subject to lots of jokes. A few states laughingly claim it as their unofficial ‘state bird.’ T-shirts sport caricatures of oversized mosquitoes preying on innocent citizens. But mosquitoes are no joke when it comes to West Nile Virus.

West Nile Virus is relatively new to this country. It first appeared in the West Nile region of Africa in the late 1930s, but was not identified in this country until an outbreak surfaced on the East Coast in 1999. Since then it has marched steadily across the United States to inhabit the entire country. Primarily occurring summer into fall in temperate zones, it can be found year-round in the milder southern climates.

How is it spread? Certain species of mosquitoes spread the virus by feeding on infected wild birds, especially crows and jays. The mosquito, with the virus infecting its salivary glands, then bites a human or animal. After an incubation period of 3 to 14 days, symptoms may arise in the person bitten.

Will I become ill if I am bitten? Not every mosquito is carrying the virus, not everyone who is bitten will develop the disease, and most persons who become infected show only mild or no symptoms at all. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), of those infected, fewer than one percent will be seriously ill, 20 percent mildly ill, and 80 percent will show no symptoms at all. However, persons over age 50 are at higher risk to develop serious symptoms.

What should I look for? Early symptoms, often overlooked or confused with other conditions, include headache, fever, chills, body aches, sore throat, diarrhea, swollen lymph nodes and skin rash. Severe symptoms include mental confusion, very high fever and severe headache, with possible convulsions, tremors, paralysis, or stupor. Usually symptoms last only a few days, but severe ones may persist for weeks and leave permanent damage, even proceeding to death.

If you think you may be infected, contact your physician promptly. There is no specific treatment for the virus, but severe cases usually require hospitalization. CDC reports that of the 4,180 known cases in the US in 2006, over 1,400 invaded the neurological system and 149 resulted in death.

How can I prevent getting it? You should not only protect yourself from infection, but also do your part to prevent mosquito breeding. The CDC has these suggestions:

- Avoid being outdoors during the peak mosquito-biting times of dawn and dusk, if possible.
- Wear long-sleeved clothing and long pants. Keep head, neck, ankles, hands and feet covered.
- Spray the clothing with insect repellants because mosquitoes can bite through thin clothing. The most effective repellants contain DEET; it can be used sparingly on the exposed skin of adults also. Natural products such as oil of lemon eucalyptus, citronella and oil of geranium, may offer some protection as well.
- Ensure that the windows and doors of your home are tight-fitting and have no holes or tears.
- Eliminate standing water around the home -- children's swimming pools, flower pots, garbage containers, and the like. Change water in birdbaths and animal water dishes regularly.
- If you find a dead bird in your yard, don't handle it with bare hands. Contact the local health department for instructions.

For more information, visit the CDC website at:

www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/index.htm

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