WEST NILE VIRUS and People 50+

West Nile virus (WNV) causes a potentially serious mosquito-borne illness that affects the central nervous system. It is a seasonal epidemic in North America that flares up in the summer and continues into the fall.

Some people infected with WNV will develop serious, and sometimes life-altering illnesses that usually require hospitalization, such as West Nile encephalitis and West Nile meningitis—conditions associated with inflammation of the brain or the area around the brain—or West Nile polio-like paralysis. Severe WNV symptoms usually develop between three and 14 days after being bitten by an infected mosquito. These symptoms can include high fever, headache, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, muscle weakness, vision loss, numbness, and paralysis. These symptoms may last several weeks and neurological effects may be permanent.

For most people, WNV usually causes no or less severe symptoms, such as fever, headache, body aches, nausea, vomiting. Sometimes this includes swollen lymph glands or a skin rash on the chest, stomach, and back. These symptoms typically last a few days—but symptoms may last for longer than several weeks, even in healthy people. Treatment generally is not needed for these symptoms, but see your health care provider if you are concerned.

Being Age 50+ is a Risk Factor

People age 50 and over are at higher risk for developing severe WNV infection. In 2004, more than 60 percent of severe WNV cases and 95 percent of the deaths due to WNV were among people age 50 or older.

WNV Can Affect Healthy People

Healthy and active older adults who spend time working and exercising outdoors have been affected by severe WNV infection. The risk of getting mosquito bites is part of leading an active life outdoors, but it's a risk that you can reduce by using repellent.

Bites by Infected Mosquitoes Spread WNV

WNV is usually spread by the bite of an infected mosquito. Mosquitoes are carriers that become infected when they feed on infected birds.

Tips for Preventing Mosquito Bites:

Use mosquito repellent when you go outdoors

You should use repellent even if you're only going outside for a few minutes. Many of the mosquitoes that carry WNV bite between dusk and dawn. If you're outside during these hours be sure to use repellent and re-apply it as needed.

Look for repellents with EPA-registered active ingredients

EPA-registered active ingredients are recommended for use as directed by the product instructions. Research suggests that repellents containing DEET (N, N-diethyl-m-toluamide), picaridin (KBR 3023), or oil of lemon eucalyptus (p-menthane 3,8-diol) typically provide longer-lasting protection than other products. Permethrin is EPA-registered for use on clothing, shoes, bed nets, and camping gear, though not directly on skin.

Wear clothing that can help reduce mosquito bites

Wear long sleeves, long pants, and socks whenever possible outdoors. Mosquitoes may bite through thin clothing, so consider spraying clothes with repellent (including permethrin) for extra protection.

Be aware of peak mosquito hours

The hours from dusk to dawn are peak mosquito biting times. Take extra care to use repellent and protective clothing.

Mosquito-proof your home

Mosquitoes lay their eggs in standing water. Empty water from buckets, cans, pool covers, flowerpots, pet water dishes, birdbaths, and other items weekly.

Install or repair screens

Keep mosquitoes outside by securing well-fitted screens to your windows and doors.

Help your community: report dead birds

By reporting cases of dead birds, you can help health departments track WNV. Check with local or state health departments to find out their policy for reporting dead birds. Support your community's mosquito control program. If none exists, ask about starting one.

FIGHT THE BITE!

- Avoid mosquito bites
- Clean out the mosquitoes from the places you work and play
- Help your community control the disease

For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/westnile or call the CDC public response hotline at 1-800-CDC-INFO or 1-888-232-6348 (TTY).

FIGHT THE BITE