

# West Nile Virus



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Dallas County Health and Human Services

**What is West Nile Virus?** West Nile Virus (WNV) is a flavivirus historically found in Africa, West Asia, and the Middle East. It is one of a group of viruses spread by mosquito bites. The virus can infect humans, birds, mosquitoes, horses and some other animals. WNV can cause mild to severe illness. Most people who get infected do not get sick. Some get a flu-like illness. In rarer cases, the virus can affect the brain and spinal cord and cause encephalitis, and can be fatal. WNV is cause for staying informed - not for panic. Learning about the virus and ways to prevent infection is key. Steps you take can help protect you from other mosquito-borne diseases, too.

**How does WNV spread?** Generally, WNV is spread by the bite of an infected mosquito. Mosquitoes are WNV carriers that become infected when they feed on infected birds. Infected mosquitoes can then spread WNV to humans and other animals when they bite. WNV is not spread through casual contact such as touching or kissing a person with the virus. In a very small number of cases, WNV has spread through blood transfusions, organ transplants, breast feeding and even during pregnancy from mother to baby.

**What are the symptoms of WNV?** People typically develop symptoms between 3 and 14 days after they are bitten by an infected mosquito. WNV can affect the central nervous system. The severity of symptoms can vary from person to person.

- **No symptoms in most people.** Approximately 80% of people who are infected with WNV will not show any symptoms and will not know they have it.
- **Mild infection in some people.** Up to 20% of the people who become infected will display mild flu-like symptoms, including headache and body aches, nausea, vomiting, as well as swollen lymph glands, or a skin rash on the chest, stomach and back. Symptoms typically last a few days. This is known as West Nile fever.
- **Serious infection in a few people.** About one in 150 people infected with WNV will develop severe illness, such as West Nile Encephalitis, West Nile Meningitis or West Nile Meningoencephalitis. The symptoms can include headache as well as neck stiffness, confusion and high fever. These symptoms may last several weeks or even months. The neurological effects may be permanent.
- **WNV is known to cause death in rare circumstances.**

**How is WNV treated?** There is no specific treatment for WNV infection. In mild cases, people experience symptoms such as fever and aches that go away on their own. In more severe cases, people may need to go to the hospital where they can receive supportive treatment including intravenous fluids, help with breathing and nursing care.

**What should I do if I think I have WNV?** If you think you may have WNV, see your doctor or health care provider as soon as possible. They will be able to run the tests needed to diagnose and treat your condition. Mild WNV illness often improves on its own. If you develop symptoms of the more severe form of WNV illness, such as unusually severe headaches or confusion, seek medical attention immediately.

**What can I do? Defend by using the 4Ds.**

- **DEET All Day Every Day**  
Whenever you're outside, use insect repellents that contain DEET or other EPA approved repellents and follow instructions.
- **Dress**  
Wear long, loose and light-colored clothing outside.
- **Drain**  
Remove all standing water in and around your home.
- **Dusk & Dawn**  
Limit outdoor activities during dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are most active.