

West Nile virus has infected animals in Washington, local case of human infection suspected



Last month, the Washington State Department of Health announced that a Franklin County man was being evaluated for suspected West Nile virus infection, based on the results of preliminary tests. Because of this development, the Hanford Environmental Health Foundation is presenting information from the DOH publication 333-052, "West Nile Virus: Do You Know What's Biting You?"

The West Nile virus is a serious illness that can affect people, horses, birds and other animals. In 1999, West Nile virus first appeared in the United States in New York City. Since then, the virus spread rapidly throughout the country. In 2002, the virus was found for the first time in birds and horses in Washington.

West Nile virus is almost always spread to people by the bite of an infected mosquito. Mosquitoes become infected after feeding on birds that carry the virus. West Nile virus is not spread by direct contact with infected people or animals. As we learn more about the virus, we may discover other routes of infection.

The risk of humans getting West Nile virus is very low, but anyone can become infected. People over 50 years of age have the highest risk of serious illness.

Most people who are infected with West Nile virus will not get sick. About one in five people will have mild symptoms such as fever, headache and body aches. Even fewer, about one in 150 people infected, will have more severe symptoms including headache, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness, paralysis and coma. If you have any of these symptoms, contact your health-care provider.

Avoid mosquitoes

There is no human vaccine for West Nile virus. The best way to protect yourself is to avoid mosquitoes and take the following steps:

- Make sure windows and doors are "bug tight." Repair or replace screens.
- If possible, stay indoors at dawn and dusk, when mosquitoes are most active.
- Wear a long-sleeve shirt, long pants, and a hat when going into mosquito-infested areas, such as wetlands or woods.
- Use mosquito repellent when necessary. Read the label and carefully follow instructions. Take special care when using repellent on children.

Here are some suggestions to discourage mosquitoes from living

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More information

For more information on the West Nile virus and human health, check out the following Web sites:

- Washington State Department of Health
www.doh.wa.gov/wnv
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/qa/insect_repellent.htm, www.cdc.gov/niosh/westnileupd.html

For more information on the West Nile virus and animal health, check out the following Web sites:

- Washington State Department of Agriculture
www.wa.gov/agr/FoodAnimal/AnimalHealth/WNVdefault.htm
- U.S. Department of Agriculture,
www.aphis.usda.gov/lpa/issues/wnv/wnv.html

For more information call:

- Washington State (toll-free) at (866) 78VIRUS
- CDC toll-free (TTY) (866) 874-2646.

West Nile virus, cont.

and breeding in your home and yard:

- Empty anything that holds standing water — old tires, buckets, plastic covers, flowerpots, and toys.
- Change the water in your birdbaths, fountains, wading pools and animal troughs at least twice a week.
- Recycle unused containers that can collect water — bottles, cans, and buckets.
- Make sure roof gutters drain properly, and clean clogged gutters in the spring and fall.
- Fix leaky outdoor faucets and sprinklers.

Insect repellents that contain N,N-diethyl-m-toluamide, known as DEET, are the most effective in keeping mosquitoes away. DEET products come in lotions, creams, gels, sprays and towelettes. Take care using products containing DEET. Read and follow instructions on the label. Do not over-use repellents.

Bird and livestock infection

When the West Nile virus infects certain wild birds, including crows, jays, ravens and magpies, they become sick and die from infection. An increase in the number of dead birds may be an indication of West Nile virus in your community.

You can help by reporting dead crows and other birds to your local health department's environmental health program. Look in the phone book under County Government - Health. Certain dead birds will be tested to monitor for West Nile virus. While there is no current evidence that you can get West Nile virus from handling dead birds, avoid bare-handed contact. Use gloves or double plastic bags to place the carcass in a garbage can.

West Nile virus can cause serious illness in horses and donkeys. Though most horses do not get sick, about one in three horses that do get sick will die. To protect your horses, ask your veterinarian about the West Nile virus vaccine for horses. Follow the same steps above to reduce places where mosquitoes live and breed near horse pastures and barns. It is rare that West Nile virus will cause illness in dogs, cats and other animals.

In our area, state and local health departments are working to identify West Nile virus before an outbreak by:

- monitoring for West Nile virus by trapping and identifying mosquitoes
- tracking the number of dead bird reports
- collecting specific species of dead birds for laboratory testing
- notifying health-care providers to look for and report symptoms in patients
- notifying veterinarians to look for and report horses and other animals with signs of West Nile virus. ■