

## West Nile Virus

In the last few years the perceived increasing occurrence of infection with the West Nile Virus (WNV) has become a concern. It is not a new illness, only more recognized lately in the United States. This is an infection of birds primarily. There are other similar illnesses transmissible to humans by mosquitoes from birds and horses as well. The WNV makes the jump from ill birds to people when carried by mosquitoes though you could also become directly infected by handling sick or dead birds. WNV qualifies as an epidemic every summer and fall though intensity varies year to year.

Because this is a mosquito borne illness preventing mosquito bites is the best way to protect yourself and your family. Empty the water from buckets, garbage can lids, kiddie pools and old tires. Drain standing water in birdbaths and ditches. Use mosquito repellent or stay in completely at dawn and dusk when mosquitoes are most active. If you must be out at those hours consider long sleeves and pants. Check your window and door screens. Don't pick up a sick or dead bird. It seems that there are only a very few-very rare- cases of infection from organ transplant or by blood transfusion from an infected person to a sick person. Generally, you would not consider a sick person as able to spread the virus to others. Breast feeding and transmission from a pregnant mother to the unborn child seems even less likely and may not happen at all. No one can say for sure. This is not where your worry should be.

Luckily for most of us (80%) acquiring the virus causes no symptoms or signs. That is, you would not even know you are infected. Asymptomatic infection is known of at all only because of specialized blood screening done on thousands of people by researchers. Only about 1 in 5 (20%) of us shows illness after a bite from a carrier mosquito. Very few mosquitoes, even during epidemic outbreaks, are carriers of WNV. If you do become symptomatic it usually takes 3-14 days after the bite to become ill. For most, the symptoms can be a mix of muscle aches, sluggish lack of energy, low grade fevers and nausea though usually no runny nose cough or congestion. Sometimes swollen glands and a rash may be present. If you get WNV symptoms you should expect to be ill this way for days or even weeks. Overall all only about 1 in 150 (0.6%) get the severe illness with unrelenting headache, stupor, paralysis, blindness, convulsions and the real possibility of permanent brain damage or death. In medicine we refer to this group of symptoms as "encephalitis" or in laymen's term "inflamed brain". As to who gets sick and who doesn't, the best we can say is that it mimics the pattern of severity we see with influenza. Expect infants and the elderly to be most at risk for the more serious cases with the occasional encephalitis or death in an otherwise healthy person. Beyond that generalization it is only a guess as to who will show signs and who remains asymptomatic after an infected bite.

Unless you are one of the very unfortunate ones (only 900 total cases in all of Texas and Louisiana this year) this is, in a way of thinking, a very easy illness to care for. If you have symptoms that might be suspicious for WNV then see your doctor but "watchful waiting" is usually the recommended course. There is no treatment for the infection. Short of actual encephalitis symptoms almost none of us need any blood testing at all. Care for even the most serious cases is primarily supportive: IV fluids, anti-seizure medicine, life support machines, etc.

**The doctors at XSTREME MD can direct you to references if you have a question about West Nile Virus or the complications.**

