

Birds and West Nile Virus

Public Information Sheet

What is West Nile virus?

West Nile virus (WNV) can cause serious illness in people due to inflammation in the brain, spinal cord or nerves. WNV was introduced into the United States in 1999. WNV is carried by mosquitoes which have bitten WNV-infected birds. An infected mosquito can spread WNV to birds, humans, horses, and other animals. WNV cannot be spread from one person to another.

Why do I need to report dead birds?

Dead birds serve as an indicator that WNV may be present in the community. If a dead bird with WNV is found in the county, the health department will inform people in the county and tell them how to protect themselves. In some cases, public health officials may also capture and test mosquitoes to determine the risk to the public.

Your local health department also alerts the Department of Natural Resources if an unusual number of dead birds are reported or if there are other unusual circumstances.

What do I do if I see a sick or dead bird?

Make a note of where you saw the bird and then call your local health department. Only if the local health department asks you to do so, put one garbage bag inside another garbage bag, and place the dead bird inside the double plastic bags. Always use gloves when handling a dead bird. If you do not have gloves, place a plastic bag over your hand. If the local health department does not need the bird for testing, it can be discarded in the regular trash. Wash your hands with soap and water after removing your gloves.

Can I get West Nile from a bird?

There is no evidence that West Nile can be transmitted just from handling a bird; however you should always take precautions when handling any sick or dead wildlife. Use disposable gloves (or put a plastic bag over your hands) and wash your hands with soap and water after discarding your gloves.

Infectious Disease Epidemiology

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Are duck and other wild game hunters at risk for WNV infection?

Because of their outdoor exposure, game hunters may be at risk if they are bitten by mosquitoes in areas with West Nile virus activity. Hunters should wear gloves when handling and cleaning animals to prevent blood exposure to bare hands. Meat should be cooked thoroughly before eating.

What can I do to help?

- Learn about and practice mosquito control measures when outdoors or in your own back yard:
 - Use mosquito repellents according to the label.
 - Wear long sleeves and long pants when outdoors during mosquito season.
 - Make sure screens and doors are 'bug-tight'.
 - Get rid of tires, buckets and other containers that hold standing water as they may serve as mosquito breeding sites.
 - Clean out gutters so they drain freely.
 - Make sure ditches drain freely to eliminate standing water on your property.
 - Sewage facilities can serve as mosquito breeding sites if not properly maintained. Property owners should make sure their facilities are operating properly.
- Report any dead birds you find to your local health department. If you have to pick up a dead bird, handle it with gloves, and wash your hands immediately once gloves are removed.

- adapted from CDC and EPA materials

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