

# WEST NILE VIRUS

## FLORIDA WELLCARE ALLIANCE FACT SHEET

Mosquitoes spread West Nile virus. Birds are a reservoir for the virus, meaning that the virus multiplies in them. Certain species of mosquitoes become infected when they bite infected birds. These mosquitoes then may spread the virus to humans and animals, such as horses and dogs. However, the virus cannot be spread to other animals or from person to person.

Anyone exposed to mosquitoes can become infected. However, adults are more likely than children to be bitten by mosquitoes, and men are bitten more often than women.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) believes that the virus can be spread through organ transplantation or blood transfusion. To prevent the spread of the virus through blood, all blood donated in the United States for transfusion is screened for the presence of West Nile virus. There is also evidence that the virus can be spread through breast milk, and from the mother to the fetus while still in the uterus.

Most West Nile virus infections cause either no symptoms or symptoms that are so mild people do not realize they have been infected. When symptoms do appear, they develop a few days to a couple of weeks after infection and include fever, headache, and body aches, occasionally with skin rash and swollen lymph nodes.

On rare occasions, the infection affects the brain or spinal cord, causing encephalitis or paralysis. Encephalitis symptoms may include headache, high fever, stiff neck, reduced attention to surroundings, disorientation, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness or paralysis, and coma.

Treatment for severe West Nile virus infection involves supportive care. Supportive treatment includes intravenous (IV) fluids, respiratory support (ventilator) if needed, and prevention of secondary infections, such as pneumonia or a urinary tract infection.

You can reduce your already low risk of West Nile virus infection by using insect repellent when you go outdoors in the summer and early fall. Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants if you know you will be in areas with a lot of mosquitoes.

You can also reduce mosquito breeding grounds. Do not keep open containers of water near your house. Standing water is a breeding site for mosquitoes.

There is a West Nile virus vaccine for horses. If you own horses, consider having them vaccinated, since the fatality rate from West Nile virus in horses is much higher than in humans.

Researchers from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the U.S. Army are trying to develop a vaccine that prevents West Nile virus.

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