

West Nile Fever

What is West Nile fever and what causes it?

West Nile fever is caused by a virus that can cause encephalitis (en-cef-a-lie-tis) (inflammation of the brain) or meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord).

What animals can get West Nile fever?

WNV primarily affects birds, but can also be infect bats, horses, cats, dogs, chipmunks, skunks, squirrels, domestic rabbits, alligators and humans.

How can my animal get West Nile fever?

WNV is spread by the bite of an infected mosquito (**vector**). Mosquitoes become infected when they feed on infected birds. Infected mosquitoes can then spread WNV to humans and other animals when they bite. A bite from an infected mosquito will not always make a person or animal sick.

How does West Nile fever affect my animal?

Most animals infected with WNV have no signs of illness. Infected horses may develop encephalitis with signs such as lethargy, weakness, incoordination, paralysis or even death. Most will not have a fever. Death can occur in birds. A very small number of dogs have been infected with WNV but generally show few signs of illness.

Can I get West Nile fever?

Yes. Humans can become infected with WNV through the bite of an infected mosquito (**vector**). A very small number of cases have been spread through blood transfusions, organ transplants, breastfeeding and during pregnancy.

Most infected people (up to 80%) will not show any signs of illness or will only have mild symptoms such as fever, headache, body aches, nausea, and vomiting. These typically improves on their own without medical attention. Very few people, less than 1% and more commonly among the elderly. Signs and symptoms may include high fever, severe headaches, neck stiffness, confusion, tremors, coma, vision loss, or paralysis.

Who should I contact, if I suspect West Nile fever?

In Animals –

Contact your veterinarian.

In Humans

Contact your physician, especially if you have symptoms of severe WNV infection.

How can I protect my animal from West Nile fever?

The best way to avoid WNV is to prevent mosquito bites. Keep horses indoors during peak mosquito activity times (dusk and dawn). Remove potential mosquito breeding sites (e.g., standing water).

Avoid or minimize lights inside stables during the evening or overnight. Using incandescent bulbs around the stable perimeter can help to attract mosquitoes away from the horses. Spray-on mosquito repellents or foggers may be useful; always read the directions carefully before using. An effective vaccine is approved for use in horses.

How can I protect myself from West Nile fever?

Preventing mosquito bites is also the best way to avoid WNV for people. Avoid being out during peak mosquito activity times (dusk and dawn). Use insect repellents containing DEET, if you have to be outdoors; always follow the label directions carefully. Wear light colored clothing so you can see mosquitoes better. Have good screens on your windows and doors to keep mosquitoes out. Reduce potential mosquito breeding sites; empty standing water from flower pots, buckets, clogged roof gutters; drill drainage holes in tire swings. Change the water in pet dishes and bird baths frequently. No vaccine is currently available for WNV in humans.

For More Information

CFSPH Technical Fact Sheets. West Nile Encephalitis at <http://www.cfsph.iastate.edu/DiseaseInfo/>

University of Nebraska. West Nile Virus Guidelines for Horse Owners at <http://ianrpubs.unl.edu/animaldisease/nf542.htm>

CDC website. West Nile Virus at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/west-nile/index.htm>



West Nile Fever
is caused by a virus
spread by mosquitoes.
It affects the brain and
nervous system.

Photos from the CDC Public Health Image Library.