



## West Nile Virus and Birds

---

### What is West Nile virus?

West Nile virus (WNV) is a viral disease previously seen only in Africa, Asia and Southern Europe. This virus can cause encephalitis, an infection of the brain and the spinal cord. WNV was first detected in the United States in 1999 when at least 62 people became seriously ill, and seven of them died. Since then, WNV has rapidly spread throughout the continental United States. In Ohio, WNV was first identified in birds and mosquitoes in 2001. The following year, the first human cases and deaths were reported in Ohio. By the end of 2002, WNV was reported in all 88 Ohio counties, either in birds, mosquitoes, humans or horses. There were 441 human and 644 horse cases identified. WNV is now established in Ohio where cases occur each year and seasonal epidemics can flare up under certain conditions in the summer and continue into the fall.

WNV is spread to people by the bite of an infected mosquito. The principal transmitter of West Nile virus is the Northern house mosquito (*Culex pipiens*). Mosquitoes first become exposed to the virus when they feed on birds that are infected with WNV. Once the mosquito is infected, it may transmit the virus to people or other animals when it bites them. Many birds can be infected with WNV, but crows and blue jays are the most likely to die from the infection. Horses, too, are prone to severe WNV infection. People cannot get WNV from another person or horse that has the disease.

### What should I do if I find a dead bird?

Although crows and blue jays are especially susceptible to WNV infection, finding these birds dead could be due to other diseases or environmental factors, not necessarily WNV. Use gloves or an implement, such as a shovel, to handle dead birds. You cannot get WNV from handling live or dead birds. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has additional information on WNV and dead birds on their website: <http://www.cdc.gov/westnile/faq/deadBirds.html>.

### Do I risk exposure to West Nile virus by handling a dead bird?

There is no evidence that WNV is spread directly from dead birds to humans. However, bare-handed contact with dead animals should always be avoided. Use a shovel or wear gloves when handling any dead animal.

### Are crows the only birds affected by West Nile virus?

No, but crows and their relatives (especially blue jays) are the most likely to die from WNV infection. Since WNV was discovered in the United States in 1999, the virus has been detected in over 300 species of dead birds. Most birds survive WNV infection.

### Are pet birds or poultry at risk for West Nile virus?

Poultry do not seem to be seriously affected by WNV. Although there is little evidence that pet birds have become ill from the virus, infections without symptoms are possible. It is a good idea to protect pet birds from biting mosquitoes.

## **Can a dead bird pose a risk to my pet dog or cat?**

The most likely way a dog or cat would become infected with WNV is by the bite of an infected mosquito. Even if infected with the virus, dogs and cats are considerably more resistant to disease than horses, humans and some species of birds. Very young and very old cats and dogs and animals with weakened immune systems are most likely to show signs of illness. Signs of a possible infection include weakness, fever and muscle spasms, although blood tests are needed to confirm a diagnosis. Treatment is consistent with standard veterinary practices for viral infections, and recovery is likely. If you suspect that your animal may be infected, seek the advice of your veterinarian. To protect dogs and cats from mosquitoes, take steps to eliminate mosquito habitat and avoid mosquito exposure. Your veterinarian may also be consulted for recommendations on safe, effective mosquito repellents that may be used on pets. DEET-containing products are not approved for pets and should not be used. It is very important not to use human insect repellent on your animal as it may cause poisoning.

## **What is the current status of West Nile virus in Ohio?**

Contact your local health department or visit the Ohio Department of Health's web site for the current status of WNV in Ohio: <http://www.odh.ohio.gov/wnv>.