



What Outdoor Enthusiasts Should Know about West Nile Virus

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.

Does West Nile virus pose a special risk to outdoor enthusiasts?

Any person bitten by a mosquito infected with WNV is at risk. The mosquito most closely associated with the disease (northern house mosquito) breeds in the stagnant water of mud puddles, ditches, flower pots, old tires, clogged gutters and similar reservoirs of water. It is important to apply mosquito repellent when participating in any outdoor activity — especially when fishing, camping or boating at night. Wearing light-colored clothing with long sleeves and long pants helps prevent mosquito bites. Window screens on campers and boats should be kept “bug-tight” as should netting on tents and similar outdoor gear. Keeping a campsite neat and orderly and eliminating any potential mosquito breeding sites is always recommended. Electric “bug zappers” do not help since these devices attract more mosquitoes than they kill.

Are hunters who field dress wild game birds at risk for West Nile virus?

There is no evidence that WNV can be transmitted directly from birds or mammals to humans through direct blood contact. However, hunters are always urged to take proper precautions and wear rubber gloves when field dressing game.

Can a person contract West Nile virus by eating infected game birds?

Proper cooking kills WNV. Consequently, there is no danger associated with eating well-cooked wild game that might be infected.

Is feeding wild birds a health risk for humans?

It is completely safe to feed and provide habitat for wild birds in Ohio. Residents are urged to clean birdbaths regularly (at least every few days); aerate backyard ponds or stock them with mosquito-eating species such as goldfish and eliminate containers of stagnant water.

What should outdoors enthusiasts do if they encounter dead birds?

While there is no evidence WNV can be transmitted through touching infected animals, it is always advisable to avoid handling dead birds and other wildlife. If it is necessary to remove a dead bird or other wildlife, don't handle it with your bare hands. Use gloves or an inverted plastic bag to place the carcass in a garbage bag, which can then be disposed of in regular trash. Additional information on WNV and dead birds is available on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website:

<http://www.cdc.gov/westnile/faq/deadBirds.html>.

Who should outdoor enthusiasts contact if they are concerned about West Nile virus?

Please visit the Ohio Department of Health's website for questions or concerns about WNV: <http://www.odh.ohio.gov/wnv>. General questions about wildlife can be directed to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) at 1-800-WILD-LIFE.

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

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