



West Nile Virus: *Elderly at Risk*

Dear Elder Care Providers:

As summer approaches, so does the risk of being bitten by mosquitoes. Now, that the West Nile Virus (WNV) has arrived in Oregon, getting a mosquito bite can be cause for concern. Most people who acquire the West Nile Virus never develop any symptoms of disease. As with many illnesses, young children and the elderly are most at risk. There are some steps that can be taken around your facility to decrease mosquito breeding as well as personal protective measures that can minimize the risk of being bitten. The following information should answer some of your questions regarding the virus and what you can do to protect yourself and your residents.

West Nile virus (WNV) is a mosquito transmitted disease that can infect humans, birds, horses and other mammals. West Nile virus is predominantly spread to humans by the bite of an infected mosquito. West Nile Virus is NOT spread by casual contact such as touching, kissing, or caring for someone who is infected. In most humans, WNV infection can cause a mild flu-like illness, or may cause no symptoms at all. However in some cases, particularly among the elderly, it can cause serious neurological diseases like encephalitis or meningitis.

Persons older than 50, particularly those over 65, have the highest risk of severe disease, such as encephalitis and meningitis.

Symptoms

Most people who are infected with WNV either have no symptoms or experience mild illness such as fever, headache and body aches before fully recovering. Some persons may develop a mild rash or swollen lymph glands. In some individuals, particularly the elderly, West Nile virus can cause encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), meningitis (inflammation of the membrane around the brain and spinal cord), and acute flaccid paralysis (a polio-like syndrome in which muscles become very weak or paralyzed). Symptoms may include: headache, high fever, stiff neck, confusion, coma, tremors, convulsions, and muscle weakness or paralysis. At its most serious, WNV can cause permanent neurological damage and death. If illness does occur, symptoms generally appear within 3 to 15 days of being bitten by an infected mosquito.

Medical Care

Currently, there is no human vaccine to protect the public against WNV, although several companies are working toward developing one.

There is no specific therapy for WNV. Most people who become infected will get better on their own. In more severe cases, intensive supportive therapy is indicated, which may include hospitalization, intravenous/IV fluids and nutrition, airway management, ventilatory support (ventilator) if needed, prevention of secondary infections and proper nursing care.

People are urged to contact their health care provider if they have concerns about their health. If symptoms such as high fever, confusion, muscle weakness, and severe headaches occur, people should see their doctor immediately.

Reduce Exposure to Mosquitoes

Evidence indicates that the chance of human infection and illness resulting from WNV is quite low. Those at greatest risk of the serious complications of WNV are those over age 50, particularly those over age 65, and they should take the greatest care to prevent exposure to mosquitoes. People over age 50 should take the following precautions from June through October, when mosquitoes are most active:

- Wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts, particularly between dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are active.
- Avoid shaded, bushy areas where mosquitoes rest.
- Limit outdoor activity, especially at dusk when *Culex tarsalis* mosquitoes are most active.
- Use an insect repellent containing DEET when spending time outdoors. **This is probably the most important action seniors can take to reduce the chances of getting bitten by an infected mosquito.**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found the elderly — who are more susceptible to adverse effects from WNV — are less likely to use a mosquito repellent so educating this group about the importance of using a repellent is key to preventing deaths from WNV. Right now DEET, diethyltoluamide, is the most effective insect repellent on the market today. DEET is not a brand name, but the active ingredient DEET or diethyltoluamide should be listed on the product label. Repellents come in aerosols, pump sprays and even moistened towelettes. After returning inside, wash with soap and water to remove DEET from skin. It is very important to read and follow label directions when using repellents. **Please consult with a person's health care provider if there are any questions regarding contraindications to using DEET**

Eliminate Mosquito Breeding

Homeowners are encouraged to eliminate mosquito breeding sites to reduce mosquito populations. Mosquitoes lay eggs in standing or slow moving water. In residential areas, standing water can accumulate in unused tires, cans, unused pools and pool covers and other receptacles that collect water. Dump water from containers after it rains to eliminate these breeding areas. Mosquitoes will also enter homes through broken screens and open windows and doors. Keep mosquitoes out of the house by fixing broken screens.

Where can you find more information about West Nile Virus?

- ✓ Clatsop County Public Health Information Line @ 325-8500
- ✓ Oregon Department of Health Services @ 1-866-703-4636 www.dhs.state.or.us/publichealth
- ✓ Center for Disease Control @ www.cdc.gov/westnile