



JUST THE FACTS



WEST NILE VIRUS

PREGNANCY AND BREASTFEEDING

What are the symptoms?

Many people infected with West Nile virus do not get sick or experience any symptoms. When the virus does cause illness, symptoms will usually appear two to 15 days from the time of being bitten.

Mild symptoms include:

fever	headaches	body aches
swollen lymph glands	mild rash	

Severe symptoms include the rapid onset of:

severe headache	high fever	muscle weakness
stiff neck	vomiting	confusion
sensitivity to light paralysis		

Anyone who experiences the sudden onset of these severe symptoms should seek immediate medical attention.

While there is no treatment or vaccine for WNV, symptoms can be treated.

Does pregnancy increase the risk of becoming infected with West Nile virus?

No. Being pregnant does not increase a woman's risk of getting infected with West Nile virus. Pregnant women who have concerns about West Nile virus or any other health concern should speak with their doctor or health care provider.

Can a pregnant woman pass West Nile virus to her unborn baby?

Yes, this can happen, although there are only a few known cases. Since the evidence shows it is possible to pass West Nile virus to an unborn child, pregnant women should take steps to reduce their risk of mosquito bites.

Can West Nile virus be passed to a child through breast milk?

There is evidence that this is possible. One woman in the United States became infected with WNV after the birth of her child. The virus was present in both the baby and the breast milk. However, the child had no symptoms and remained healthy.

Should women with symptoms of West Nile virus continue to breastfeed their children?

- Women who are breastfeeding their children should contact their doctor if they have symptoms of any illness, including West Nile virus.
- There is evidence that West Nile virus can be passed through breast milk, but the level of risk is still unknown. However, the health benefits of breastfeeding are well known.
- Women with concerns should discuss the risks with a healthcare provider.

Canada had its first confirmed case of mosquito transmitted West Nile virus in 2002. While the risk of West Nile virus infection is low and the risk of serious health effects from the virus is even lower, it is important for everyone to take steps to reduce their risk of getting bitten by mosquitoes.

WHAT IS... West Nile Virus?

The West Nile virus (WNV) is a mosquito transmitted virus that can be transferred to humans from the bite of an infected mosquito. A mosquito becomes infected when it bites a bird with WNV.

There is no evidence to suggest that you can get WNV by touching or kissing an infected person. There is also no evidence that the virus can pass from infected animals, such as horses or pets, to people. However, it is still important to follow standard health and safety practices when handling dead birds or animals, such as wearing protective gloves.

What steps should pregnant and breastfeeding women take to reduce their risk?

Reduce the chances of being bitten.

There is evidence that West Nile virus may be passed through breast milk and from a mother to her unborn child. It is therefore important for pregnant and breastfeeding women to take some simple precautions to reduce their risk of being bitten by a mosquito, which also reduces the chance of getting West Nile virus.

- Use insect repellents that contain DEET or other approved ingredients when going outdoors. Read and follow the manufacturers' directions for safe use.
- Make sure that door and window screens fit securely and are free of holes.
- Limit the time you spend outdoors at dawn and dusk, when mosquitoes are most active.
- Wear long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and a hat when outdoors. Light-coloured clothing is best as mosquitoes tend to be attracted to dark colours.
- Cover strollers and outdoor playpens with mosquito netting.

Is insect repellent containing DEET safe?

There is no evidence that the use of DEET by pregnant or breastfeeding women poses a health hazard to unborn babies or children who are nursing. However pregnant or breastfeeding women may wish to consider the use of non-chemical methods to prevent mosquito bites as a first line of defence against West Nile virus.

For more information on DEET and other insect repellants visit Health Canada's website, www.pmra-arla.gc.ca/english/consum/insectrepellents-e.html.

Eliminate mosquito breeding sites around your home and other properties.

Mosquitoes lay eggs in standing water, so any undisturbed or stagnant water becomes habitat for larvae. Even a small amount of water, such as in a saucer under a flower pot, is enough to act as a breeding ground. As a result, it is important to eliminate as much standing water as possible.

- Keep pool covers properly stored and free of water.
- Remove unused items from around your property (e.g., old tires) because they have a tendency to collect water.
- Change the water in wading pools, bird baths, pet bowls, and livestock watering tanks at least twice a week.
- Cover rain barrels with tightly fitting screens or lids.
- Cover or drill holes in recycling bins and other containers kept outside. This avoids water collecting in the bottom.
- Clean out eavestroughs regularly to prevent clogs that can trap water.
- Run an aerator in ornamental ponds or stock them with fish or frogs. This will keep the surface water moving and therefore inhospitable to mosquito larvae.
- Keep wheelbarrows and plastic wading pools turned over when they are not being used.



What is the Windsor-Essex County Health Unit doing?

In 2010 the Health Unit, along with each municipality, will continue to conduct human surveillance to monitor for West Nile virus. The larviciding program will continue throughout the 2010 summer season, along with investigating standing water complaints and distributing educational materials, such as this "Just the Facts" sheet.

For more information about larvicides, visit the Ministry of Environment at www.ene.gov.on.ca/environ/land/westnile.

For more information.

Other "Just the Facts" information sheets on West Nile virus:

- West Nile Virus
- Protecting Young Children
- Protecting the Elderly
- Protecting Campers
- Protecting Outdoor Workers
- For Veterinarians
- Blood Products, Organ and Tissue Donation

Windsor-Essex County Health Unit

www.wechealthunit.org/diseases-conditions

519-258-2146

References:

Health Canada. (2006). *West Nile virus – protect yourself!* Retrieved May 22, 2007, from http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/wn-no/index_e.html