



## **WEST NILE VIRUS Overview**

### **What is West Nile Virus?**

West Nile Virus (WNV) is a mosquito-borne infection that was first isolated in Africa in 1937. The virus is transmitted to humans through the bite of an infected mosquito. Mosquitoes become infected by biting an infected bird.

### **How serious is WNV?**

Research indicates that about one out of five people who are infected with WNV will develop symptoms. Most people who are infected have either no symptoms or a mild illness known as West Nile fever. In about one per cent of infected individuals, WNV can cause severe illness resulting in hospitalization. The disease is rarely fatal. Some people (even with milder illness) find that it can take months to feel well again after being infected with WNV.

### **What are the symptoms of WNV?**

In humans, most infections of the virus result in no symptoms. In those who do become ill, symptoms such as fever, extreme tiredness, frontal headache, muscle aches, and skin rash are most common. More serious symptoms can include neck stiffness, muscle weakness, and confusion. The time between infection and the onset of symptoms, called the incubation period, is between three and 15 days.

If you have concerns or you are feeling very sick, you should seek medical attention. Extreme swelling or infection at the site of the mosquito bite is another reason to seek medical help but it does not mean you have WNV.

### **How do people get WNV?**

People become infected with the virus through a mosquito bite. WNV is not spread through person-to-person contact such as touching or through coughing, sneezing or drinking from a shared cup. The virus has not been transmitted to humans through normal contact with an animal infected with the virus. There have been no cases of WNV in humans from contact with infected birds in a natural environment. However, dead birds can carry a variety of diseases and should not be handled with bare hands. When dealing with a dead bird, use a shovel to place the bird in a double plastic bag or use a double plastic bag as a glove to pick it up.

In rare cases, WNV can be transmitted through blood transfusion and organ transplants if the donor was recently infected with WNV. WNV can also be transmitted from a mother to her unborn child or through breast milk, but these events are also rare. The benefits of breastfeeding outweigh the risk from WNV.

### **Who is at risk for WNV?**

While anyone can be infected with WNV, the chances of having a severe illness are greater as you get older, even if you are healthy. You may be at greater risk if you have a weakened immune system.

### **Is there a vaccine against WNV?**

No. A vaccine for WNV doesn't exist to protect people. An experimental vaccine is being used for horses and other animals.

### **Can cats and dogs get WNV?**

Although there have been a small number of reports of WNV causing illness in dogs, it is still believed to be a rare event. No cat deaths from WNV have been reported. Owners of young, old or sick dogs may especially want to take precautions to minimize mosquito bites of their pets (e.g. using mosquito netting on outdoor pens, avoid walking their dog from dusk to dawn). People should not apply insect repellent to dogs or cats since they will lick it and may become sick.

There is no documented evidence of WNV transmission from dogs or cats to humans.

### **What is the Region of Peel doing about WNV?**

The Region of Peel has developed a Vector-Borne Disease Prevention Plan to deal with WNV. Activities outlined in the WNV component of the plan include public education, monitoring for WNV in people and the environment and implementing measures to reduce mosquito breeding. The plan is available at [www.peel-bugbite.ca](http://www.peel-bugbite.ca).

For more information about WNV and the Region of Peel's Vector-Borne Disease Prevention Plan, call

**905-799-7700**

**from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday to Friday  
Caledon residents call toll-free at 905-584-2216.**

**[peel-bugbite.ca](http://www.peel-bugbite.ca)**