

PUBLIC EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Objective:

To inform Peel residents about WNV and the measures that they can take to prevent human illness including mosquito breeding site reduction and mosquito personal protective measures.

Background:

In 2001, Peel Public Health introduced its first WNV Public Education Campaign – Put Mosquitoes out of Touch. The campaign informed Peel residents about WNV and emphasized personal protection against mosquito bites and habitat reduction. The tactics included a mail-out to over 300,000 households, the development of an information package for public distribution at targeted locations, development of a dedicated WNV Web site www.peel-bugbite.ca and advertisements in local newspapers. The successive campaigns in 2002 and 2003 were built on this original initiative and each year materials and tactics are reviewed, revised and enhanced.

In 2004, Peel Public Health and Communication Services developed a strategy and messages to complement the provincial WNV campaign. The objectives of the communication activities in 2004 included: continued education of residents about WNV, the need to report dead crows, the importance of mosquito reduction through the removal of sources of stagnant water on their property and the use of personal protection measures.

The tactics of the 2004 WNV public education campaign in Peel included a mail-out to over 320,000 households in Peel, businesses, large property owners and multi-cultural groups, advertisements in local papers, distribution of educational materials to the area municipalities and Region of Peel staff.

The WNV Web site was also a useful tool for providing timely and accurate information about WNV to the public. The site was regularly updated to inform residents of the status of the larviciding schedule. There was also a larvicide fact sheet developed to address how and why it was being done, how environmental impacts were to be minimized and human health protected.

Peel Public Health also introduced the option of reporting standing water on-line using a form on the WNV Web site. Previously, stagnant water reports could only be made by calling Health Line Peel.

Local health care practitioners were updated through Health Professional Updates that provided them with medical updates regarding WNV. Weekly updates on the WNV activity in Peel were also sent to Regional Councillors, local infectious disease specialists and leaders of infection control community agencies.

In 2004, Peel Health hired PMG Consulting to measure the attitudes, behaviour change and knowledge of WNV among Peel residents. A quantitative field survey of a statistically valid sample of Peel Region residents and focus groups were conducted. The results provided the Region of Peel with a snapshot of residents' awareness, attitudes and concerns toward WNV.

Overall, the results demonstrated that Peel residents are getting the message about WNV. There is a high level of awareness of how WNV is spread and how to prevent it, such as eliminating stagnant water and using personal protection measures. Even though people who are aware of WNV are more apt to know what precautions to take, they report that they often do not take precautions. This behaviour is echoed in the answers to WNV questions in the Rapid Risk Factor Surveillance System survey. Peel Health and Communication Services have reviewed these documents and used the collected data in the development of the 2005 WNV Public Education Campaign.

Planned Activities:

- Presentations on the West Nile Virus Prevention Plan will be made at Regional and area municipal Councils if requested. Additional presentations to the general public will be conducted on an as-needed, issue-driven basis.
- Existing and new educational materials will be produced and distributed in high-traffic areas in Peel. They will also be shared with local municipalities, neighbouring health departments, and conservation authorities for their information and distribution. Most materials will also be available on the Region of Peel WNV Web site.
- Educational materials will be sent to special groups: long-term care facilities, child care centres, garden centres, parks and recreation departments, physicians, golf courses and horticultural societies.
- Educational materials will also be sent to various seniors' groups in all three municipalities (e.g., Mississauga Seniors' Centre, Brampton Senior Citizen Council)
- The WNV display, in conjunction with other educational materials, will be used to educate the public about the issue. It will be set up and staffed by Peel Public Health employees in strategic locations such as Regional facilities, other high-traffic areas in Peel and the Children's Water Festival.
- Ministry of the Environment regulatory requirements for public notification of the use of larvicides will be met through regular newspaper notices. In areas other than catch basins a notice of larviciding sign will be posted at the site.
- A series of advertisements with key WNV messages will be placed in local newspapers in Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon.

- Extensive media relations activities will include ongoing news releases to the local and specialty media (garden, seniors, parenting), interviews with MOH and AMOH and media briefings and/or news conferences if required.
- The WNV Web site (www.peel-bugbite.ca) was enhanced for easier navigation in 2004. It will continue to be regularly updated with information on WNV biology, transmission, personal protection and reduction measures. The catch basin larviciding schedule will be updated regularly. An on-line stagnant water form was added to the web site in 2004. On-line submissions accounted for approximately 10% of the stagnant water reports. On-line stagnant water reporting will continue in 2005.
- Local health care providers will be notified through a faxed newsletter Health Professionals Update. Early in the WNV season information on WNV signs and symptoms, laboratory diagnosis, treatment, patient counselling and reporting to Peel Public Health will be provided. Additional notification will be provided on the status of WNV should the situation progress or change.
- To assist partner agencies to respond to public inquiries with consistent information, a series of updated WNV Q & A fact sheet will be distributed to the offices of Regional and local Councillors, Brampton and Mississauga Animal Services, local municipalities, conservation authorities, hospitals, other key stakeholders, and Regional call centres. Fact sheets will also be available on the Region of Peel WNV Web site.
- WNV weekly updates will be produced for Regional Councillors, local municipalities, neighbouring health departments, conservation authorities, the media, and other stakeholders. The update will be widely distributed and will also be available on the Web site.
- Communication to Regional employees will consist of regular updates to all Regional staff through Pathways, Inside Peel, departmental meetings and informal discussions.
- A multicultural component of the strategy will include enlisting the help of Peel Public Health's internal contacts from ethnic communities to disseminate WNV key messages through local and GTA ethnic media and through multicultural community centres. Translated WNV fact sheets will also be available on the Web site for downloading and distribution.
- A contingency communication plan in the event of adulticiding has been developed. It includes tactics such as public meetings, advertising, direct mail, news conferences and briefings, news releases, updates on the WNV Web site with information on adulticiding including maps and schedules for spraying, ongoing updates to key audiences, and notices in local newspapers.

- Peel Public Health will also act as a resource to local occupational health and safety departments if they require assistance in drafting policies and educating employees regarding WNV. Peel Public Health will provide occupational health and safety training to its employees involved in mosquito surveillance and control operations. Additionally, Peel Public Health will require that employees of contracted vendors be provided with similar training and information.