

West Nile Virus

Facts You Should Know

Q. What is the West Nile Virus and how is it spread?

The West Nile virus is a virus that can be transmitted by infected mosquitoes. The virus can cause inflammation or swelling of the brain (encephalitis). In a few cases, this can be fatal. The virus is spread to humans, birds, horses, and other animals through the bite of an infected mosquito. If an uninfected mosquito bites an infected animal, the mosquito becomes infected. There is no evidence to suggest that the West Nile virus can be spread from person to person or from an animal (other than a mosquito) to a person.

Q. What are my chances of getting the West Nile virus?

In areas where the West Nile virus has been reported, only a small proportion of mosquitoes are likely to be infected with the virus. Even if the mosquito is infected, less than 1 percent of people who get bitten and become infected will get seriously ill. The chances that you will become severely ill from any one mosquito bite are extremely small.

Q. How would I know that I have it? What are the symptoms and what is the prognosis?

Most people who are infected will have either mild symptoms or no symptoms at all. When symptoms do develop, the most common are similar to any other viral, "flu-like" infection—including fever, headache, rash, lymph gland swelling, and general muscular aches and pains. When severe, a person may have a very high fever and become disorientated. While there is no specific treatment for this viral infection, very ill patients may be hospitalized for supportive care.

Q. What should I do if I think that I have symptoms of the West Nile virus?

If a mosquito bites you, you do not need to see your doctor. Most people who contract the West Nile virus suffer a mild illness and recover without any treatment. However, if you do develop (or one of your family members develops) symptoms of a *severe* infection, please call your medical advice nurse immediately. The advice nurse is on-call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Q. Is there anything I can do to protect myself?

Although your chance of acquiring the infection is very remote, it is always a good idea to protect yourself from mosquito bites. First, make certain that there is no standing water around your house that will provide a breeding site for mosquitoes. Second, for protection from bites when outdoors, wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants when possible. Apply to your skin and clothes repellents containing DEET (such as Off! and Cutter products). In addition, consider staying indoors at dawn, dusk, and in the early evening when mosquitoes are feeding the most.

Q. How can I learn more about this virus?

You may contact the following: cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile or call the CDC Helpline at 1-888-246-2675 for English speaking assistance (1-888-246-2857 for Spanish). More detailed information is also included on Kaiser Permanente's Web site, www.kaiserpermanete.org. Click on the "Members Only" button.

Q. How do you test for the West Nile virus?

Your personal physician or other member of your medical team will first take a medical history to assess your risk for the West Nile virus. People who live in (or who have traveled to) areas where the West Nile virus has been identified are at risk for getting the virus. If a medical professional determines that you are at high risk and that you have symptoms of the West Nile virus, you will have your blood drawn and analyzed to determine if you have the virus.

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Other resources

- ❖ Visit your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center.
- ❖ Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- ❖ Listen to Kaiser Permanente Healthphone messages by calling 1-800-33-ASK ME (1-800-332-7563). For people with impaired hearing, the TTY Healthphone number is 1-800-777-9059.

To get your free handbook and Healthphone directory, call 1-800-464-4000.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your doctor. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse any brand names; any similar products may be used.