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## West Nile Virus: Frequently Asked Questions

*(Adapted from materials supplied by the New York State Bureau of Health)  
updated 3/11/04*

Beginning July 1, the Maine Bureau of Health will renew West Nile Virus (WNV) surveillance activities. During 2003, with the assistance of Animal Control officers and other participating groups, the Maine Bureau of Health collected 891 birds; 98 of which tested positive for the virus. Virus positive birds were found throughout the state. To date, there have not been any reported cases of WNV in humans in Maine. Since 1999 when West Nile virus was first identified in New York City, the virus has spread to a total of 45 States. In 2003, there was close to 3,000 cases of severe illness and 230 deaths attributed to WNV nationwide.

The Maine Bureau of Health and other State agencies are working to improve awareness about West Nile Virus. Although the chance of a person becoming ill is small, there are some simple steps you can take to reduce the risk. This handout provides information on ways in which Mainers can protect themselves and their families from this mosquito borne infection.

### **WHAT IS THE MAINE BUREAU OF HEALTH DOING ABOUT WEST NILE VIRUS?**

The Maine Bureau of Health has developed a surveillance system to track the emergence of West Nile virus in Maine. By tracking the spread of the virus, prevention efforts can be better focused to help educate the public on ways in which they can protect themselves and their families from the disease.

### **WHAT IS WEST NILE VIRUS?**

West Nile virus is a mosquito-borne infection that can cause serious illness. Although chances of a person getting sick are small, there are some simple steps you can take to reduce your risk of being bitten by mosquitoes.

### **WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF WEST NILE VIRUS?**

Mild cases of West Nile infections may include a slight fever and/or headache. More severe infections are marked by a rapid onset of a high fever, headache, body aches, disorientation, tremors, and convulsions. In more severe cases, paralysis or deaths have occurred. Symptoms occur from 5 to 15 days after exposure. There is no specific treatment, other than treating the symptoms and providing supportive care.

### **WHO IS AT HIGHEST RISK FOR BECOMING SERIOUSLY ILL?**

Persons who are at highest risk for serious illness are persons over the age of 50. Healthy children and adults are at low risk for infection.

### **DO ALL MOSQUITOES TRANSMIT DISEASE?**

No. Most mosquitoes do not transmit disease. While there are about 40 different species of mosquitoes in Maine, only certain species have been associated with West Nile virus.

### **WHERE DO MOSQUITOES LIVE AND BREED?**

Mosquitoes lay their eggs in moist areas, such as standing water. The eggs become larvae that remain in the water until the adults mature and fly off. Weeds, tall grass and shrubbery provide an outdoor home for adult mosquitoes. They can also enter houses through unscreened windows or doors, or broken screens. Many mosquitoes will breed in containers that hold water, such as flowerpots or discarded tires.

## **WHEN ARE MOSQUITOES MOST ACTIVE?**

Some mosquitoes are most active between dusk and dawn, when the air is calm. However, others will feed at any time of day.

## **WHAT BIRD(S) CAN CARRY WEST NILE VIRUS?**

In many parts of the northeast, most West Nile virus-positive affected birds have been within the Corvid family (American crows, jays and sparrows); however, other birds can become infected. There is no evidence that birds can transmit West Nile virus to people, but gloves should be worn when handling any dead bird or animal. Maine Bureau of Health is implementing a limited bird surveillance program for West Nile virus that includes collecting dead bird reports and testing selected birds.

## **CAN MY PET BE INFECTED?**

West Nile virus has been confirmed in some domestic animals, including pet birds, dogs and cats. Horses can become seriously ill, if infected. It is important to remember that birds and animals cannot transmit West Nile virus to people. For questions about WNV in pets and other domestic animals, contact one of the State Veterinarians at the Department of Agriculture at 207 287-3701.

## **HOW CAN I PROTECT MY FAMILY AND MYSELF?**

- Dispose of tin cans, plastic containers, ceramic pots or similar water-holding containers.
- Remove all discarded tires on your property, as they can provide sites for significant mosquito breeding activity.
- Drill holes in the bottoms of recycling containers that are kept outdoors.
- Make sure roof gutters drain properly, and clean clogged gutters in the spring and fall.
- Remove leaf debris and keep brush trimmed.
- Turn over plastic wading pools and wheelbarrows when not in use.
- Change the water in birdbaths and animal dishes frequently.
- Clean vegetation and debris from edges of ponds.
- Clean and chlorinate swimming pools, outdoor saunas and hot tubs.
- Drain water from pool covers.
- Use landscaping to eliminate standing water that collects on your property.

## **SHOULD WE STAY INDOORS?**

It is not necessary to limit any outdoor activities. However, you can and should try to reduce your risk of being bitten by mosquitoes. In addition to reducing standing water in your yard, make sure all windows and doors have screens, and that all screens are in good repair. In addition,

- Wear shoes, socks, long pants and a long-sleeved shirt when outdoors for long periods of time, or when mosquitoes are most active.
- Avoid being outdoors during times when mosquitoes are most active, such as dawn and dusk.
- Consider the use of mosquito repellent, use according to directions.

## **WHAT ELSE CAN WE DO?**

In addition to reducing potential breeding sites on your own property, you can encourage your neighbors, local businesses and municipal agencies to do so as well. You can also work with local service, labor, religious and fraternal organizations to promote community-wide clean up activities.

**For more information about West Nile virus, contact the Bureau of Health, Division of Disease Control at (800) 821-5821 or visit our website at <http://www.state.me.us/dhs/boh/ddc/westnile.htm>**