



Extension FactSheet

Veterinary Preventive Medicine, 1900 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210

Frequently Asked Questions About Birds and West Nile Virus

What Is West Nile Virus?

West Nile Virus (WNV) is a viral disease previously seen only in Africa, Asia, and southern Europe. This virus can cause encephalitis, an infection of the brain and the spinal cord. For the past three years, WNV has caused disease in the United States. In 1999, at least 62 people became seriously ill, and seven of those died. Since then, WNV has rapidly spread throughout 27 states and the District of Columbia. During the year 2000, 21 human cases of WNV encephalitis were reported in the United States, with two deaths. In 2001, 56 cases with 7 deaths were reported. In Ohio, WNV was first identified in a blue jay collected in Lake County. No human or horse cases were identified. It is expected that WNV will continue to be a disease threat in 2002.

The West Nile Virus is spread to people by the bite of an infected mosquito. The principal transmitter of West Nile Virus is the Northern House Mosquito (*Culex pipiens*). Mosquitoes first become exposed to the virus when they feed on birds that are infected with WNV. Once the mosquito is infected, it may transmit the virus to people or other animals when it bites them. Many birds can be infected with WNV, but crows and blue jays are most likely to die from the infection. Horses are also prone to severe WNV infection. People cannot get WNV from another person or horse that has the disease.

Continued spread of this disease among wild birds and mosquitoes is anticipated. In Ohio, state, federal, and local agencies are working together to address the potential health risks of WNV to Ohio families and their animals. Public health

officials found WNV in crows, blue jays, and mosquitoes in 29 Ohio counties during 2001. Once this was known, mosquito control efforts were increased in those areas to protect people from the disease.

Reporting Dead Crows

Q. Why should I report a dead crow or blue jay?

A. As part of Ohio's surveillance plan for West Nile Virus, the state departments of agriculture and health are monitoring dead crows and blue jays in Ohio. Crows and blue jays are related and are especially susceptible to West Nile Virus infection. A dead bird that shows no other sign of injury or reason for death may have died from a West Nile Virus infection. Bird deaths have preceded outbreaks of this disease in other cities, so dead crows and blue jays can be an early warning that West Nile Virus is present.

Q. What should I do if I find a dead crow?

A. If you find a dead crow or blue jay, contact your local health department.

Q. What information do I need to give to the person I talk to?

A. You'll be asked for the specific location of the bird, including the address, county, and zip code, and when it was found. We'll also want to know how many crows you've found dead, and if there are any signs of injury. Finally, we'll ask for your name and telephone number in case we need to get more information from you.



Ohio Department of Health • Ohio Department of Agriculture • Ohio Department of Natural Resources
The Ohio State University • Ohio Environmental Protection Agency • Association of Ohio Health Commissioners
Ohio Mosquito Control Association • Ohio Environmental Health Association • United States Department of Agriculture

Q. When will you pick up the bird?

A. Because of the number of birds that may need to be tested, we won't be picking up every bird that is reported. You'll be told if the bird is needed and given further instructions at that time.

Q. What should I do if I'm told the bird isn't needed for testing?

A. If testing is not required, use a shovel or wear gloves and double bag the bird in two plastic bags and dispose of it in the trash.

Q. Do I risk exposure to West Nile Virus by handling a dead bird?

A. There is no evidence that West Nile Virus is spread directly from dead birds to humans. However, health professionals advise that bare-handed contact with dead animals should always be avoided. Use a shovel or wear gloves when handling any dead animal.

Q. How long does it take to test a dead bird for West Nile Virus?

A. Because birds will be tested based on a predetermined set of priorities, not the date received, it is not possible to provide you with a timeframe.

Q. When will I receive the test results of the bird(s) that I submitted?

A. As soon as possible. A large number of birds will be tested. For example, in 2001, more than 6,000 birds from 27 states and the District of Columbia were documented as infected with West Nile Virus; far more birds were tested but did not carry the disease. Your efforts to report dead birds for testing are a very important part of the West Nile Virus surveillance in your area.

Q. How will test results be used?

A. Test results will be used to monitor the occurrence of West Nile Virus in towns and cities and to make decisions regarding appropriate control measures. We know that dead birds usually precede human infections. This gives us time to warn residents and increase mosquito control in the area.

Q. If I see a lot of crows roosting in an area, should I be concerned about West Nile Virus?

A. No. Seeing crows alive and well is a good indication that the virus is not in your area. Dead crows, however, may indicate the

presence of the virus and should be reported to your local health department.

Q. Are crows the only birds affected by West Nile Virus?

A. No, but crows and their relatives (especially blue jays) are most likely to die. Large numbers of North American crows and other birds were observed becoming ill and dying. Some exotic birds in the Bronx Zoo died. The West Nile Virus has been identified in at least 70 species of birds found dead in the United States. The public reported most of these birds. Wildlife biologists have also found evidence that some healthy birds have been exposed to the West Nile Virus and have survived.

Q. Are pet birds or poultry at risk for West Nile Virus?

A. Poultry does not seem to be seriously affected by the West Nile Virus. Although there is little evidence that pet birds have become ill from the virus, infections without symptoms are possible. It is prudent to protect pet birds from biting mosquitoes.

Q. Can a dead bird pose a risk to my pet dog or cat?

A. To date, there is no evidence that a pet having any type of contact with a dead bird, including eating it, will develop West Nile Virus. There is evidence that a small number of dogs and cats have been infected with West Nile Virus, so you should protect your pet from biting mosquitoes. Eliminate stagnant water around your property—regularly clean bird baths, drain water puddled in old tires, empty water-filled buckets and containers where mosquitoes might breed.

What is the status of WNV in Ohio?

As of August 2001, **WNV has been confirmed in Ohio.** Infected mosquitoes and birds were found in 29 Ohio counties in 2001. Therefore, it is likely that the virus is present throughout the state. Contact your local health department or log on to the web sites listed here.

For the current status on WNV in Ohio and for more information, you can log on to the following web sites:

Ohio State University:

<http://prevmed.vet.ohio-state.edu/>

Ohio Department of Health:

<http://www.odh.state.oh.us/ODHPrograms/ZOODIS/ZooMain1.htm>

Visit Ohio State University Extension's WWW site "Ohionline" at:
<http://ohionline.osu.edu>