



Extension FactSheet

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

What Outdoor Enthusiasts Should Know About 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, too, are 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.

Does West Nile Virus Pose a Special Risk to Outdoor Enthusiasts?

Any person bitten by a mosquito infected with WNV is at risk. The mosquito most closely associated with the disease (northern house mosquito) breeds in the stagnant water of mud puddles, flower pots, old tires, clogged gutters, and similar reservoirs of water.

It is important to apply mosquito repellent when participating in any outdoor activity — especially when fishing, camping, or boating at night. Wearing light-colored clothing with long sleeves and long pants helps prevent mosquito bites. Window screens on campers and boats should be kept “bug-tight” as should netting on tents and similar outdoor gear. Keeping a campsite neat and orderly and eliminating any potential mosquito breeding sites is always recommended. Electric “bug zappers” do *not* help since these devices attract more mosquitoes than they kill.

Are hunters who field dress wild game birds at risk for WNV?

There is no evidence that West Nile Virus can be transmitted directly from birds or mammals to humans through direct blood contact. However, hunters are always urged to take proper



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precautions and wear rubber gloves when field dressing game.

Can a person contract West Nile Virus by eating infected game birds?

Proper cooking kills the West Nile Virus. Consequently, there is no danger associated with eating well-cooked wild game that might be infected.

Is feeding wild birds a health risk for humans?

It is completely safe to feed and provide habitat for wild birds in Ohio. Residents are urged to clean birdbaths regularly (at least every few days); aerate backyard ponds or stock them with mosquito-eating species such as goldfish; and eliminate containers of stagnant water.

What should outdoors enthusiasts do if they encounter dead birds?

People who encounter freshly dead birds with no other apparent illness or injury should alert the local health department. Health officials are currently monitoring deaths in Ohio's crow population to track the progression of West Nile Virus.

West Nile Virus cannot be transmitted through simple touching. However, anyone handling dead wildlife should always wear rubber gloves.

Responsible public action coupled with responsible individual behavior is the best way to prevent the spread of West Nile Virus and keep Ohioans safe from this new disease.

Outdoor enthusiasts concerned about WNV should contact:

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources at 614-265-1015 or 614-265-6860.

Or visit the ODNR web site at www.dnr.state.oh.us and link to the West Nile Virus Work Group page for updated information on the disease.

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 "Ohioline" at:
<http://ohioline.ag.ohio-state.edu>

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