

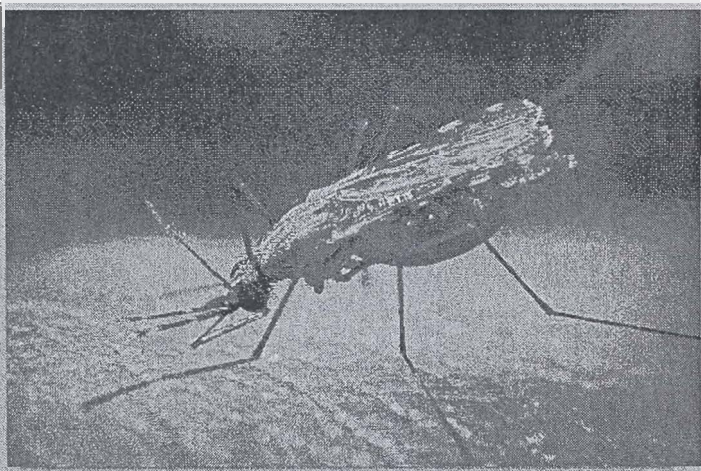
# WEST NILE VIRUS

## A National Safety Council Fact Sheet

**W**est Nile virus primarily is a disease of birds. It is commonly found in Africa, West Asia and the Middle East, but also has caused outbreaks in Europe. West Nile virus is similar to the virus that causes St. Louis encephalitis, which for years has been found in the United States. West Nile had not been found in the United States before the summer of 1999.

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

Most people infected by West Nile virus have no symptoms at all, or experience something that feels like flu. Symptoms of "West Nile fever" may include fever, headache, achy muscles and joints, and extreme tiredness, perhaps with skin rash and swollen lymph glands. In a fraction of cases, people infected with West Nile become extremely ill. In these severe cases, the fever can lead to disorientation, tremors, paralysis, meningitis or encephalitis, which is fatal in some



cases or may cause neurological aftereffects. The incubation period – the time between an infectious bite and the onset of symptoms – usually is five to 15 days.

### HOW DO YOU CONTRACT WEST NILE VIRUS?

Humans contract West Nile virus largely from the bite of mosquitoes. Although some 150 species of mosquitoes are found in the United States, the primary transmitter of West Nile is *Culex pipiens*, also known as the common house mosquito. The mosquito catches the virus when it bites an infected bird and can then pass the virus along if the mosquito later bites a human. The virus also may be transmitted in other ways –

through organ transplants, blood transfusions, breast milk and from mother to fetus – but the risk of such transmission is very low. People of all ages may be affected by West Nile virus; however, those who are older than 50, or who have had an organ transplant, are at increased risk of severe illness.

West Nile virus has been found in more than 70 different species of birds and other animals, but corvids (e.g., crows, ravens, jays and magpies) seem particularly vulnerable. The virus also has been found in horses, dogs and a cat. Avoid bare-handed contact with any dead animals.

### WHERE HAS WEST NILE VIRUS BEEN DETECTED?

The human cases and fatalities in the first major U.S. outbreak in 1999 all were in the New York City area, but infected mosquitoes and birds also were found in Connecticut and New Jersey. The fall 1999 outbreak ended when the hard frosts of the oncoming winter ended most mosquito activity. By 2004, the virus was reported throughout the continental United States, and in 2005 almost 3,000 cases were reported.

Testing for West Nile virus is available. If you exhibit symptoms, and have traveled or live in an area where West Nile virus has been identified, contact your local doctor. Your provider will draw a blood sample and send it to a commercial or public health laboratory for confirmation.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP FIGHT MOSQUITOES?

- Use mosquito repellent containing DEET, picaridin, oil of lemon eucalyptus or permethrin.
- Eliminate stagnant water that can turn into mosquito breeding sites (i.e., old tires, buckets, bird baths or rain barrels).
- Keep swimming pools treated, fountains circulating and rain gutters unclogged.
- Install or repair windows and door screens, and be sure they are bug-tight.
- Replace your outdoor lights with yellow "bug lights."
- Wear head nets, long sleeves and pants if you venture into areas with high mosquito populations.
- Support community-based mosquito control programs.

*Excerpted from the National Safety Council's "West Nile Virus" Fact Sheet. Access additional articles on more than 80 safety and health topics in the National Safety Council Fact Sheet Library at [www.nsc.org/library/facts.htm](http://www.nsc.org/library/facts.htm). Please read the "Disclaimer/Use Policy" before redistributing content.*