

NEWS

METROPOLITAN WEST NILE VIRUS UPDATE

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Public Health Officials Launch Human Surveillance Project To Help Monitor Presence of West Nile Virus

Saint Louis County, Missouri, July 11, 2002 – Ever since West Nile virus (WNV) was confirmed in dead birds in the St. Louis metropolitan area last fall, health officials have anticipated its potential spread to the human population. Local public health agencies formed a *Metropolitan West Nile Virus Response Plan*, to monitor WNV transmission and coordinate response measures. Reports of dead birds, along with collection and testing of mosquitoes, help public health experts detect West Nile virus before the human population is infected. Now another layer of surveillance has been added.

Starting July 1, physicians and emergency rooms will be requested to immediately report all suspected cases of viral encephalitis, viral meningitis and Guillain-Barré syndrome. Patients with these illnesses will be assessed to determine if WNV infection is the cause. The objective of the human surveillance project is to quickly detect human disease that may be due to WNV so that necessary prevention measures can be implemented, including mosquito control and public information activities. Saint Louis County, St. Louis City, St. Charles, Jefferson and Franklin Counties are working together in a cooperative effort to prevent West Nile virus from spreading to humans.

Public health officials are still asking citizens to report crows, blue jays, or hawks that have recently died or seem to be dying with no apparent injuries. To report dead birds, log on to www.stlouisco.com or www.scchealth.org and proceed to the West Nile virus page for instructions. If you don't have access to the Internet, please call your local health department. In Saint Louis County the phone number is 314-615-1630; in St. Charles County it's 636-949-7404; and in the City of St. Louis it's 314-622-4252. Jefferson County residents may call 636-789-3372. In Franklin County call 636-583-7300.

Symptoms of West Nile virus include fever, headache, and body aches, occasionally with skin rash and swollen lymph glands, stiff neck, disorientation and muscle weakness. Symptoms usually appear 3 to 15 days after infection. More severe infection may be marked by headache, high fever, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness, paralysis, and, rarely, death. Persons over 50 years of age and people with compromised immune systems have a higher risk of severe disease. In rare cases the disease can cause encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) and may prove fatal. If you have any of the above symptoms, contact your health care provider.

West Nile encephalitis is diagnosed through blood testing. No human vaccine has been approved, but several companies are working towards developing a vaccine. Most infections are mild, and most people who get infected with WNV don't show symptoms. The disease infects birds and is spread through mosquitoes. A diseased bird cannot infect humans – the only way to get it is through a mosquito bite. The chance of becoming severely ill from a single mosquito bite is extremely small.

Prevention is paramount in reducing the risk of exposure. Health officials urge people to reduce their chance of exposure by taking preventive steps, such as:

- Eliminate standing water sites where mosquitoes can breed by removing tires, buckets, and other water-holding objects from their property.
- Change the water and clean birdbaths at least once a week.
- Clean and chlorinate swimming pools or drain and cover if not in use; to prevent water from accumulating in pool covers.
- Unclog gutters and down spouts.
- Wear long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and socks.
- Use insect repellents (follow product instructions carefully).
- Make sure screens fit tightly in doors and windows.

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