

What is West Nile Virus?

West Nile virus is a mosquito-borne virus that is commonly found in parts of Africa, West Asia, and the Middle East and in 1999 it was identified in the United States. Since 1999, West Nile has spread across the United States infecting humans, birds, horses and other animals. In 2003, Iowa reported 147 infected residents including six deaths. West Nile virus is spread to humans, birds, and other animals through the bite of an infected mosquito.

Why should senior citizens be concerned about West Nile?

Persons over the age of 50 are at increased risk of developing the severe form of West Nile. Very few mosquitoes are infected with the West Nile virus and most persons who are bit by an infected mosquito will never develop illness. Some persons will develop a mild illness with symptoms of headache and/or slight fever, and <1% of those persons bit by an infected mosquito will develop the severe form of West Nile virus. Severe infections, including encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), are characterized by high fever, headache, confusion, muscle aches and weakness, seizures, and paralysis. You should contact your healthcare provider if you develop severe symptoms. It is not necessary to contact your physician if you have been bit by a mosquito and have no symptoms.

Senior citizens can prevent West Nile by avoiding mosquito bites:

- Limit outdoor activities during prime mosquito hours of dawn and dusk.
- Shoes, socks, long pants, and a long-sleeved shirt should be worn when outdoors for long periods of time or when mosquitoes are most active. Clothing should be light colored and made of woven material. Shirts should be tucked in with the collar buttoned.
- Use an insect repellent containing DEET. Concentrations of up to 30% DEET is safe for adults; reapply as necessary. Follow all label instructions for application use.
- Use mosquito netting when sleeping outdoors or in unscreened structures.
- Repair holes in screens and make sure both screens and doors are tight fitting.

Senior citizens can prevent West Nile by eliminating mosquito breeding sites:

- Eliminate areas of standing water on your property where mosquitoes can breed.
- Turn over or remove items in your yard where rainwater can collect, such as ceramic pots, toys, buckets, tin cans, wheelbarrows, wading pools, plastic containers, and tarps covering firewood.
- Make sure roof gutters are clean and in good repair.
- Change water in birdbaths and pet bowls every 3-4 days.
- Repair leaky outdoor faucets, air conditioners, and hoses.
- Do not over water lawns, shrubs, or flowers.
- Stock ornamental ponds and water gardens with mosquito dunks or fish that eat mosquito larvae.
- Keep grass cut short and shrubbery trimmed.
- Dispose of old tires or drill drainage holes in tires used in landscaping.
- Keep trashcans covered.

For more information on West Nile virus visit: www.idph.state.ia.us