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West Nile virus: What parents should know

How is West Nile virus spread?

West Nile virus is spread by infected mosquitoes. Not every mosquito carries West Nile virus, and not every person bitten by a mosquito will be infected with West Nile virus. But if you live in an area where the virus is active, you should protect yourself and your family.

In Canada the virus peaks in late August to early September.

Do mosquitoes everywhere carry the virus?

In Canada, the virus can be found in mosquitoes in Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. There have been cases reported in Atlantic Canada and British Columbia, but they have been travel related.

The Public Health Agency of Canada keeps track of where the virus is active. For more information visit <<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/wn-no/index-eng.php>>.

What are the symptoms of infection with West Nile virus?

Usually, people with the virus will have no symptoms. If symptoms do develop, it's usually between 3 and 14 days after they have been bitten by an infected mosquito.

Symptoms are often flu-like and can include fever, aches and fatigue. In very few cases, the virus can cause a serious illness such as encephalitis (a swelling of the brain), meningitis (a brain infection) or paralysis.

Is West Nile virus dangerous to children?

Serious illness from West Nile virus is more common in adults than in children. Most children who get the virus will only have a mild illness. It's still possible for children to get very sick, but this is very rare.

Children with weak immune systems or who already have a serious illness are more likely to be very sick.

What if I am pregnant or breastfeeding?

There is at least one known case of a pregnant woman passing on the virus to her unborn baby. The baby was born with serious medical problems. However, it isn't clear if the virus was the only factor involved. No more

cases have been found to date, despite many pregnant women having evidence of the infection.

In another case, a mother passed on the virus through her breast milk, but her baby didn't show any symptoms. It isn't necessary for infected women to stop breastfeeding.

Although pregnant women are no more at risk than other people, you should take care to prevent mosquito bites.

What can I do to protect my children?

The best protection against West Nile virus is to avoid mosquito bites. There is no treatment or vaccine to prevent the disease.

If you live in an area where the virus is active, protect your children when they are outside, whether at home, school, daycare or camp. Here's what you can do:

- Help reduce the number of mosquitos
Mosquitoes breed in standing water (water that isn't moving), even very small amounts. To reduce the number of breeding spots around your home:
 - Drain standing water from items such as toys, flower pots, cans, buckets, barrels and pool covers often.
 - Remove things in which water can collect, such as old tires.
 - Clean and change the water in swimming pools, decorative pools, children's wading pools and bird baths often.
 - Clean out clogged gutters.
 - Cover rain barrels with screens.
- Reduce your chance of being bitten
 - Mosquitoes are most active at dawn and dusk. Spend less time outside during these times.
 - Windows and doors should have screens that fit tightly and have no holes.

Information for parents and caregivers

- Use mosquito nets or screens for baby strollers.
- Wear protective clothing when possible:
Light-coloured clothing with long sleeves and cuffs, long pants tucked into socks or shoes, and hats are recommended.
- Use insect repellents
Insect repellents don't kill mosquitoes, but they make us unattractive to them. The only products proven to work outdoors for a long period of time are those that contain a chemical called DEET.
Not all products have the same concentration (amount) of DEET. The amount of DEET in a product is shown as a percentage, such as 10% DEET.
Insect repellents used on children should have a small concentration of DEET, depending on the age of the child. **DEET should not be used on children younger than 6 months of age.**
- For children between 6 months and 2 years of age, use products with no more than 10% DEET, only once a day.
- For children between 2 and 12 years of age, use products with no more than 10% DEET, up to 3 times a day.

- For children older than 12 years of age, use products with no more than 30% DEET.
Re-apply when it no longer seems to be working.
The number of hours your child will be protected depends on how much DEET is in the product.

For more information

- Canadian Paediatric Society
 - Insect repellents for children
<<http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/keepingkidssafe/repellents.htm>>.
 - West Nile virus: An update.
<www.cps.ca>
- Public Health Agency of Canada
 - Pregnancy & breastfeeding.
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/wn-no/preg-gros_e.html>
 - Surveillance, education, prevention and response.
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/wn-no/surveillance_e.html>
 - West Nile virus – protect yourself!
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/wn-no/index_e.html>

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