

West Nile Virus: Dogs and Cats

Q. Can West Nile virus (WNV) cause illness in dogs or cats?

A. A relatively small number of WNV infected dogs (<40) and only 1 WNV infected cat have been reported to CDC during 2003. Experimentally infected dogs* showed no symptoms after infection with WNV. Some infected cats exhibited mild, nonspecific symptoms during the first week after infection--for the most part only showing a slight fever and slight lethargy.

It is unlikely that most pet owners would notice any unusual symptoms or behavior in cats or dogs that become infected with WNV.

Q. How can my veterinarian treat my cat or dog if they are/may be infected with WNV?

A. There is no specific treatment for WNV infection. Full recovery from the infection is likely. Treatment would be supportive (managing symptoms, if present) and consistent with standard veterinary practices for animals infected with a viral agent.

Q. Does my dog/cat becoming infected pose a risk to the health of my family or other animals?

A. There is no documented evidence of dog or cat-to-person transmission of West Nile virus. The evidence suggests that dogs do not develop enough virus in their bloodstream to infect more mosquitoes. Cats develop slightly higher levels of virus in their bloodstream, but it is unclear if this would be enough to infect mosquitoes. It is very unlikely that cats would be important in furthering the spread of the virus.

If your animal becomes infected with WNV, this suggests that there are infected mosquitoes in your area. You should take measures to prevent mosquitoes from biting you (use repellent and wear protective clothing.) Veterinarians should take normal infection control precautions when caring for any animal (Including birds) suspected to have this or any viral infection.

Q. How do cats and dogs become infected with West Nile virus?

A. Dogs and cats become infected when bitten by an infected mosquito. There is also evidence that cats can become infected with the virus after eating experimentally infected mice.

Q. Can I become infected with WNV if a dog with the virus bites me?

A. Preliminary studies have not been able to detect virus in the saliva of infected dogs. This suggests that dog bites pose a low risk, if any, of transmission of WNV from dogs to other animals or people.

Q. Is there a vaccine for cats or dogs?

A. No.

Q. Should a dog or cat infected with West Nile virus be destroyed?

A. No. There is no reason to destroy an animal just because it has been infected with West Nile virus. Full recovery from the infection is likely. Treatment would be supportive and consistent with standard veterinary practices for animals infected with a viral agent.

Q. Can I use insect repellent on my pets?

A. DEET-based repellents, which are recommended for humans, are not approved for veterinary use (largely because animals tend to ingest them by licking.) Talk with your veterinarian for advice about the appropriate product for use on your pet.

For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/westnile, or call the CDC public response hotline at (888) 246-2675 (English), (888) 246-2857 (Español), or (866) 874-2646 (TTY)