

West Nile Virus: Overview

Q: What are West Nile virus, West Nile fever, and West Nile encephalitis?

A: West Nile Virus is a flavivirus commonly found in Africa, West Asia, and the Middle East. It is closely related to St. Louis encephalitis virus which is also found in the United States. The virus can infect humans, birds, mosquitoes, horses and some other mammals.

West Nile Fever is a mild disease in people, characterized by flu-like symptoms. West Nile fever typically lasts only a few days and does not appear to cause any long-term health effects.

More severe disease due to a person being infected with West Nile virus can be **West Nile encephalitis, West Nile meningitis or West Nile meningoencephalitis**. Encephalitis refers to an inflammation of the brain, meningitis is an inflammation of the membrane around the brain and the spinal cord, and meningoencephalitis refers to inflammation of the brain and the membrane surrounding it.

Q: Where did West Nile virus come from?

A: West Nile virus has been commonly found in humans and birds and other vertebrates in Africa, Eastern Europe, West Asia, and the Middle East, but until 1999 had not previously been documented in the Western Hemisphere. It is not known from where the U.S. virus originated, but it is most closely related genetically to strains found in the Middle East.

Q: How long has West Nile virus been in the U.S.?

A: It is not known how long it has been in the U.S., but CDC scientists believe the virus has probably been in the eastern U.S. since the early summer of 1999, possibly longer.

Q: I understand West Nile virus was found in "overwintering" mosquitoes in the New York City area in early 2000. What does this mean?

A: One of the species of mosquitos found to carry West Nile virus is the Culex species which survive through the winter, or "overwinter," in the adult stage. That the virus survived along with the mosquitoes was documented by the widespread transmission the summer of 2000.

Q: Is West Nile virus now established in the Western Hemisphere?

A: The continued expansion of West Nile virus in the United States indicates that it is permanently established in the Western Hemisphere.

Q: Is the disease seasonal in its occurrence?

A: In the temperate zone of the world (i.e., between latitudes 23.5° and 66.5° north and south), West Nile encephalitis cases occur primarily in the late summer or early fall. In the southern climates where temperatures are milder, West Nile virus can be transmitted year round.

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)