



West Nile Virus

Older Adults

Q: What is West Nile virus?

A: West Nile Virus (WNV) is a viral illness transmitted by mosquitoes; it is not transmitted person to person. WNV infection may produce mild flu-like illness symptoms, but it can also cause encephalitis and death.

Q: Why is West Nile concern in the elderly?

A: Although less than 1% of persons infected with WNV develop severe illness, case fatality rates range between 3% and 15%. The majority of serious WNV infections and deaths occur in persons over the age of 50; the typical age of those that develop encephalitis is 68 years and older. Advanced age and the presence of diabetes are independent risk factors that make Long Term Care (LTC) residents vulnerable to this disease. Except for children with immune disorders who are also at high risk for severe infection, younger persons who become infected tend to fare much better.

A large study in Connecticut showed that individuals over the age of 50 and those that did not speak English were also the least likely to take appropriate precautions against mosquito bites. This emphasizes the importance of the role that LTC facility staff must play in actively protecting residents from exposure to mosquitoes.

Q: What are the signs and symptoms of infection?

A: The signs of WNV infection include common viral infection symptoms such as fever, muscle aches, and rash as well as more severe symptoms. Severe cases manifest signs and symptoms of central nervous system infection such as high fever, stiff neck, confusion, sensitivity to light, seizures, and coma.

Q: What can a Long Term Care Facility do to prevent WNV infections?

A: Diseases such as WNV that are transmissible by insects make having intact window screens a matter of disease prevention, and DHS reminds all Long Term Care facilities that State regulations require that facilities have screens on all operable windows.

Perform a careful visual inspection of all window screens in your facility, and immediately repair or replace screens that permit the entry of mosquitoes. Remain alert to complaints concerning the presence of insects in your facility. The presence of any outdoor insect indoors is strong evidence that there is some unprotected entry through which mosquitoes can also enter. Carefully inspect your facility grounds in order to identify and drain standing water. Standing water is a potential mosquito breeding ground. Ensure that residents that go outside for recreation are adequately protected. Their exposed skin areas should be treated with permethrin, DEET or a similar insect repellent until the mosquito season is over in your area. Remember that mosquitoes are most active during the cooler morning and evening hours. Take appropriate precautions to protect your residents against mosquito bites.

If you have any questions about West Nile virus, please contact the Denton County Health Department at (940) 349-2909.