

West Nile Virus

Over the last few years there has been concern over the ongoing problem with West Nile Virus (WNV) in the USA. **During 2003** over 9000 confirmed cases of WNV in humans occurred in the USA and 230 people died. WNV is spread by the bite of an infected mosquito, and can infect people, horses, many types of birds, and some other animals. Most people who become infected with WNV will have either no symptoms or only mild ones. However, on rare occasions, WNV infection can result in severe and sometimes fatal illnesses. There is no evidence to suggest that WNV can be spread from person to person or from animal to person.

The disease

The reported incubation period is 3 to 15 days. Most people who are infected do not get symptoms or experience a mild flu like illness; less than 1% of persons infected with WNV virus will develop serious illness. Severe illness associated with WNV includes acute encephalitis, aseptic meningitis and, uncommonly, Guillain-Barre syndrome. Symptomatic disease and severe illness are more common in older people(aged>50).

Prevention

There is no vaccine against WNV so prevention is primarily by **avoiding mosquito bites**. It is important to remember that the risk of travellers to the USA acquiring West Nile virus is low and there have been no reports of cases in travellers to the USA from the UK to date. However, it is important that travellers to areas where there is active transmission to humans (particularly people over 50 years of age, who are more at risk of developing severe disease) are aware of the potential risk and take the appropriate anti-mosquito measures. **Health professionals offering travel health advice should advise travellers on appropriate prevention of mosquito bites.**

Although the risk of transfusion-associated WNV infection occurring in Northern Ireland is low, the Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion service has recommended that potential blood donors who have travelled to any part of the USA or Canada should not give blood until 28 days after leaving the region (or 28 days after the onset of any symptoms consistent with WNV infection).

Preventing Mosquito bites

Most of the mosquitoes that carry the West Nile virus are especially likely to bite around dusk and dawn. If you are outdoors around these times of the day, do everything you can to reduce mosquito bites. Use an effective insect repellent if required in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. Indoors, mosquito bites can be reduced by air conditioning, insect-proof screens on windows and doors and spraying the room with insecticide. Bed nets and cot nets can be used if necessary. There has been virus found in

some day-biting mosquitoes too, so reducing bites at any time is a sensible precaution. Consider staying indoors at dawn, dusk, and in the early evening, which are peak mosquito biting times.

Note: Vitamin B and "ultrasonic" devices are NOT effective in preventing mosquito bites.

For the most up to date information on West Nile Virus and it's distribution within the USA please visit the following websites:

http://www.hpa.org.uk/infections/topics_az/west_nile/menu.htm

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/index.htm>