

## **PROTECT YOUR FAMILY FROM WEST NILE VIRUS; THE ELDERLY AND THOSE WITH WEAKENED IMMUNE SYSTEMS ARE AT GREATEST RISK**

West Nile virus (WNV) is a mosquito-borne disease that is common in Africa, west Asia and the Middle East. WNV was first detected in the United States in New York in 1999. Since then, WNV has spread to 46 states, including California.

As of late May this year, WNV has been detected in birds and mosquitoes in southern California. In 2003, three locally acquired human WNV cases were confirmed in Los Angeles, Imperial and Riverside counties, and WNV was detected in dead birds, mosquitoes, sentinel chickens and a horse in six southern California counties. Nationwide, there were almost 10,000 human cases of WNV, including 262 deaths.

Individuals usually get WNV from the bite of an infected mosquito. There is also evidence that WNV can be acquired via a blood transfusion or organ transplant from an infected donor. Most people who are bitten by a mosquito with WNV will not get sick. People who do become ill may experience mild to moderate flu-like symptoms like fever, headache and body ache. It is estimated that less than 1 percent of the people who are infected with WNV become severely ill and require hospitalization. The elderly and immune compromised are particularly susceptible to illness caused by WNV.

Currently there is no specific treatment for WNV infection. Since it is a virus, it does not respond to antibiotics. In severe cases hospitalization and supportive care is important. If you have symptoms of WNV, call your doctor.

You can reduce your risk of illness from WNV by doing the following:

- Avoid spending time outside at dawn and dusk when mosquitoes are active. They are especially active for two hours after sunset.
- When outdoors, wear long pants, long sleeved shirts and other protective clothing.
- Apply insect repellent containing DEET according to label instructions.
- Make sure that doors and windows have tight fitting screens. Repair or replace screens that have tears or holes.
- Eliminate all sources of standing water that can support mosquito breeding.

California has a long history of conducting surveillance for mosquito-borne viruses and has taken active steps to ensure early detection of WNV. Due to ongoing collaboration among more than 70 local mosquito and vector control

agencies and state public agencies, California is well prepared to detect, monitor and respond to WNV. These agencies use a variety of scientific techniques and products to control mosquitoes in their earliest stages and play a key role in reducing the risk of WNV. Also, California has launched a statewide public education effort about personal protection measures and reporting dead birds.

The public is encouraged to assist in the efforts to detect and monitor WNV by calling the California Department of Health Services' WNV hotline if they find a crow, raven, magpie, jay or hawk that has been dead for about a day. Birds play an important role in maintaining and spreading this virus. Mosquitoes acquire the virus from infected birds, and then transmit the virus to people. Evidence of the virus in dead birds is often the first indication that WNV has been introduced into a new region. The toll free hotline to report dead birds is 877-WNV-BIRD. More information is on the Web site at [www.westnile.ca.gov](http://www.westnile.ca.gov).