



skin rash, neck stiffness or swollen lymph nodes. However, WNV can cause serious illness, including swelling of the brain. Those at greatest risk for serious illness from WNV are the elderly and individuals with lowered immune systems.

WNV is transmitted to humans and animals primarily through a mosquito bite. Human-to-human transmission of WNV generally does not occur. However, human WNV infection was associated with blood transfusions and organ transplants in 2002.

Individuals can reduce their risk of bites and mosquito-borne diseases by taking these precautions:

- 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 the active ingredient DEET according to label instructions. (Check the ingredients as not all repellents contain DEET.)
- 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 on your property that can support mosquito breeding.
- Contact your local mosquito and vector control agency if there is a significant mosquito problem where you live or work. You can get the phone number of your agency by calling toll-free 877-WNV-BIRD

In an effort to increase public awareness about WNV, the California Department of Health Services (CDHS) will be disseminating "Fight the Bite" public educational materials and a public service announcement (PSA) about the virus statewide. The PSA, in English and Spanish, was produced by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A comprehensive surveillance program to monitor for WNV in California has been established by CDHS in collaboration with the University of California, Davis, California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA), local mosquito and vector control districts and other state and local agencies. The program includes testing suspect cases in humans and horses, capturing and testing mosquitoes, testing sentinel chickens and evaluating dead birds. Approximately 220 flocks of sentinel chickens at sites throughout the state are tested every two weeks for the presence of the virus.

The public can become part of the state's monitoring effort for WNV by reporting any crows, ravens, magpies, jays, sparrows, finches and raptors that may have been dead for less than 48 hours to a special statewide toll-free hotline: 877-WNV-BIRD. Individuals should take note of the bird's location. The bird should show no signs of decomposition or maggot infestation.

The tissue of dead birds is tested for the presence of WNV. Detection of WNV in dead birds is often the first indication that the virus has moved into a new region. While there

is no evidence that people can get the virus from handling live or dead infected birds, individuals should not attempt to catch or handle them.

Since horses are susceptible to WNV and a vaccine is available for horses, horse owners are advised to contact their veterinarians about timely vaccinations. CDFA has released a PSA that informs horse owners of the importance of early vaccination and mosquito control measures.

"I encourage Californians to join the fight against West Nile virus by participating in the state's extensive monitoring effort and reporting dead birds," Shewry said. Information about WNV is available by calling the hotline or visiting the Web site:

<http://www.westnile.ca.gov/> .