West Nile Virus

West Nile Virus is a new infection in the United States, just being discovered in 1999 in New York City. The first patients were discovered because of viral meningitis symptoms—a severe headache, confusion and other typical viral symptoms such as achy muscles, red eyes, abdominal pain and a rash.

It was first discovered in dead crows and zoo birds in New York City, and since then it has been found to be carried by hundreds of species of birds.

In the years since these first cases occurred in New York City the virus has spread over the country very quickly. The range and number of cases has increased rapidly. This is probably due to bird migrations being a factor in its transmission.

West Nile Virus is normally transmitted by mosquitoes which have become infected. The main host animals are birds, but occasionally horses.

Although West Nile can be a severe--or even life-threatening--illness, the majority of patients with West Nile are not severely ill. It is estimated that only about one in 150 people develop severe symptoms such as meningitis.

The symptoms develop 2-15 days after the bite with the sudden onset of a headache, rash, abdominal pain, red irritated eyes, and achy muscles.

The best prevention is mosquito control. Eliminate unnecessary breeding habitat such as standing water. Use a mosquito repellent such as DEET and wear long-sleeved clothing when outside, especially at dusk and dawn.

There is no immunization yet to help prevent the illness, and antibiotics and other medicines do not cure it. This makes prevention the most important factor at this time.