

# Going Online to Get the Latest Buzz on West Nile Virus

**By Howard and Judi Wolinsky**

As dusk approached, we packed up our Labor Day picnic and headed home. We were steering clear of mosquitoes, which especially enjoy a meal at dusk and dawn. Some of these pesky critters are spreading West Nile virus, which until three years ago was virtually unknown in the United States.

Recently, however, it seems to be in the news almost daily. The latest development is the possibility that the West Nile virus was spread via donated organs or blood (<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/07/26/health/main516475.shtml>).

Despite the alarming headlines, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reassuringly notes: "Human illness from West Nile virus is rare, even in areas where the virus has been reported. The chance that any one person is going to become ill from a mosquito bite is low."

The CDC and local health departments are working to make accurate information available to the public. The CDC's West Nile virus Web site (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile>) offers information on all aspects of the virus.

The CDC points out most people who are infected don't develop any illness: Only about 20% of infected persons develop West Nile fever with symptoms including mild fever, headache and body aches, and sometimes a rash and swollen glands.

Just 1 in 150 people who are infected develop the severe form of the disease, with symptoms like headache, high fever, neck stiffness, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness and paralysis. The most severe cases, those involving brain inflammation, are called West Nile encephalitis. Even in these severe cases, however, the CDC estimates that between 85 and 97 % of patients will survive.

Those statistics should help ease your mind. You should also know that a little prevention goes a long way: The CDC site ([http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/ga/insect\\_repellent.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/ga/insect_repellent.htm)) and the CDC's Bam! site for kids (<http://www.bam.gov/detectives/westnile.htm>) offer advice on how to protect yourself from mosquito bites.

State and local health departments have also been monitoring the progress of West Nile virus and sharing information with the CDC. For the latest buzz from these departments or to see what's happening in your state, go to the CDC's links to state and government sites ([http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/city\\_states.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/city_states.htm)). Cases have been reported in over 25 states -- to view the geographic progress of West Nile virus check out the CDC's map-based pages (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/surv&control.htm#map1>).

Some states provide advice on how to help reduce the mosquito population. The Louisiana Office of Public Health (<http://www.oph.dhh.state.la.us/infectiousdisease/westnile/index.html>) notes that a small bucket of stagnant water can become the home for up to 1,000 mosquitoes in seven days. The department recommends dumping wading pools and wheelbarrows, throwing away old tires, cleaning clogged gutters and getting rid any other standing water. It also offers other suggestions on things you can do to reduce the mosquito population.

The Illinois Department of Public Health offers a diagram ([http://www.idph.state.il.us/envhealth/wnv\\_house/wnv\\_house.htm](http://www.idph.state.il.us/envhealth/wnv_house/wnv_house.htm)) providing ideas on how to eliminate common backyard breeding spots for mosquitoes.

Research on a vaccine to prevent West Nile virus infections is being stepped up. Meanwhile, don't forget to apply insect repellent, change the water in your birdbath, and watch the news -- and check with the CDC -- for current information on the West Nile virus.

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