

HIGHLIGHTS OF NOVA SCOTIA'S WEST NILE VIRUS RESPONSE PLAN

Illness due to West Nile virus (WNV) can be caused by a bite from an infected mosquito. Most infected people show very mild symptoms with no lasting effects, but the virus can cause serious illness, and can even be fatal.

To prevent illness due to West Nile virus in Nova Scotia, Nova Scotia Health Promotion and Protection, in cooperation with several other provincial departments (Department of Natural Resources, Department of Agriculture, and Department of Environment) implements the West Nile virus response plan each year. Highlights of this year's plan are below.

1. West Nile virus Working Group

The WNV Working Group was established in 2000 to follow the development of West Nile virus in other parts of North America and develop a response plan for Nova Scotia. The group consists of experts in birds, mosquitoes, animal and human health who are working together to ensure a consistent and consolidated approach to protecting Nova Scotians from West Nile virus. This group of experts is responsible for developing and implementing the West Nile virus plan and for ongoing assessment of the risk of West Nile virus to Nova Scotians.

2. West Nile virus Watch

This surveillance program is carried out throughout the summer in cooperation with the Department of Natural Resources, who collects and test dead birds (crows, jays and ravens) for the virus.

In addition, through the Department of Natural Resources and the Public Health Agency of Canada, mosquitoes may be tested for West Nile virus only if clusters of West Nile virus positive birds are detected within the province.

Nova Scotia Health Promotion and Protection will watch closely for indication of any human cases in the province.

West Nile virus Watch is updated regularly on the Nova Scotia Health Promotion and Protection website.

3. Public Awareness and Education Campaign

The West Nile virus public education campaign is part of a larger “Enjoy the Outdoors Safely” campaign developed to make Nova Scotians aware of West Nile in addition to Lyme disease and Rabies.

The West Nile virus portion of the campaign includes a poster and brochure containing general information, a frequently asked questions document providing more detailed information, and updates to the West Nile virus section of the Department of Health Promotion and Protection website. In addition, articles will be provided to community papers and newsletters on how to protect yourself from mosquito bites, and there will be continued contact with the media to update the public on the West Nile virus situation in Nova Scotia.

4. Information for Health Professionals

Physicians will be updated on WNV initiatives via a letter and through Doctors NS website. Regular contact will continue between Nova Scotia Health Promotion and Protection and District Health Authorities, and other stakeholders to ensure that they receive all relevant information on the virus.

5. Diagnostic Testing for Human Illness

In order to ensure prompt diagnosis of West Nile virus illness in Nova Scotia, initial testing requested by physicians will be done in Nova Scotia at the QEII Health Sciences Centre, with confirmatory testing at the Public Health Agency of Canada’s National Microbiology Lab in Winnipeg if required.

6. Co-operation with Canadian Blood Services

Canadian Blood Services (CBS) successfully implemented a blood test for West Nile virus on July 1st, 2003. CBS will be immediately notified of West Nile virus activity in the province, so they can quickly assess the risk to the blood supply and take appropriate action. CBS will also immediately notify Nova Scotia Health Promotion and Protection if they detect the virus as a result of their donor-screening program. CBS is represented on the WNV Working Group.

7. Reducing Exposure to Mosquitoes

Initiatives will include avoidance, personal protection from bites, and reduction of mosquito breeding grounds such as gutters, empty containers and pool covers. Tips for the public on reducing exposure to mosquitoes will be included in information materials and posted on the website. There has been very limited West Nile virus activity in Nova Scotia to date. Decisions around mosquito reduction measures will be based on ongoing assessment of several factors including WNV activity in the province and health risks.

Nova Scotians can decrease their chances of getting WNV illness by preventing mosquito bites. This can be done by avoiding areas and times of day when mosquitoes are most active, wearing protective clothing, and using personal insect repellants.

For more information:

To learn more about West Nile virus, visit the Nova Scotia Health Promotion and Protection Website <http://www.gov.ns.ca/hpp/cdpc/wnv.asp>

For health related questions contact the nearest Public Health Services Office.

For information related to pesticides or mosquito habitat, call the Department of Environment at 1-877-9-ENVIRO.

For reporting a dead crow, jay or raven call the local office of the Department of Natural Resources during business hours, or the toll free number at 1-800-565-2224 after hours.