West Nile Virus
What is it?
Where did it come from?

The West Nile Virus is a mosquito-borne virus that can cause encephalitis, an inflammation of the brain, or meningitis, an inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord. Infected mosquitoes transmit the virus to humans and animals while biting to take blood. The virus itself is located in the mosquito’s salivary glands. During blood feeding, the virus may be injected into the animal or human, where it may multiply, possibly causing illness or death.

The mosquitoes become infected when they feed on infected birds, which may circulate the virus in their blood for a few days. Following transmission by an infected mosquito, West Nile Virus multiplies in the person’s blood system and crosses the blood-brain barrier to reach the brain. The virus interferes with normal central nervous system functioning and causes inflammation of brain tissue.

Before 1999 West Nile Virus had not been found in Americans. However, outbreaks of the virus occurred prior to 1999 in Africa, Egypt, Israel, Asia, Romania, Russia and France. In 1999, 62 cases of severe disease, including 7 deaths, occurred in the New York area. In 2000, 21 cases were reported, including 2 deaths in the New York City area. In 2001 there were 66 human cases of severe disease and 9 deaths. As of August 2002, state health departments have released information on 113 cases of West Nile Virus related human illness this year, including 5 deaths. The continued expansion of West Nile Virus in the United States indicates that it is permanently established in the Western Hemisphere.

On a more positive note... In areas where the virus is circulating, very few mosquitoes are infected with the virus. Even if the mosquito is infected, less than 1% of people who get bitten and become infected will get severely ill. The chances you will become severely ill from any one-mosquito bite are extremely small.

West Nile Virus **IS NOT** transmitted from person-to-person. This means that you cannot get the virus from touching or kissing a person who has the disease, or from a health care worker who has treated someone with the disease.

Material provided by the Center’s for Disease Control (CDC)

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