

RRFSS Reports on... West Nile Virus Awareness

About West Nile Virus



West Nile Virus (WNV) is a mosquito-borne virus that infects birds, some animals and humans.

The risk of infection is low, and less than 1% of people infected become seriously ill.

The majority of people infected with WNV show no symptoms. About one in five people have symptoms such as fever, headaches, and body aches that may be accompanied by a skin rash and swollen glands. Symptoms usually occur 3 to 15 days after exposure.

Adults 50 years of age and older and people with compromised immune systems are at higher risk of getting severe illness. Symptoms of severe infection include neck stiffness, extreme confusion, disorientation, muscle weakness, vision loss, numbness and paralysis. Anyone suffering from any of the above symptoms should seek medical attention.

Toronto Public Health's WNV prevention program includes three components:

- Community outreach including education campaigns that provide information on what people can do to reduce the risk from WNV. This supplements information provided by Health Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care;
- Monitoring WNV in humans, birds, and mosquitoes; and
- Mosquito reduction.

For more information on how to protect yourself and your family from WNV, please visit Toronto Public Health's web site at www.toronto.ca/health

About RRFSS



The Rapid Risk Factor Surveillance System (RRFSS)

is a monthly telephone survey used by Toronto Public Health to monitor community knowledge, attitudes and risk behaviours related to a variety of public health issues including WNV. There are 21 health units in Ontario currently participating in RRFSS. The Institute for Social Research at York University administers the survey for each participating health unit. In Toronto, approximately 100 residents are surveyed each month. Respondents are Toronto residents aged 18 years and over who speak English and have a telephone in their household. For more information on RRFSS, please visit www.rrfss.on.ca

Torontonians Highly Aware of WNV – Most Feel They Are Not At Risk

Between June and September, 2005, RRFSS surveyed 400 Toronto residents regarding WNV awareness and personal and household protective behaviours. In the previous year, between May and September, 2004, an over-sample of 900 residents was obtained.

The 2004 and 2005 results for questions related to WNV awareness indicate that most residents in the City of Toronto are highly aware of WNV and know how the virus is transmitted to humans. One in five felt they were at risk of becoming ill from WNV. The results also indicate that just over one-third of respondents are making more of an effort to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes since hearing about WNV. Only one in four respondents correctly identified older people as being the group most at risk for serious illness.

Details pertaining to these results are presented on the following page.

RRFSS Results For WNV Awareness

	2004 estimate	CI*	2005 estimate	CI*
Heard about WNV	95.5%	±1.4%	91.9%	±2.6%
Knew that WNV is transmitted to humans by mosquitoes	80.8%	±2.6%	75.1%	±4.2%
Knew older people (50 years and older) are most at risk of serious illness from WNV	24.7%	±2.8%	22.9%	±4.1%
Among Respondents Who Heard About WNV				
Perceived themselves at risk of becoming ill from WNV	20.2%	±2.7%	17.8%	±3.9%
Behaviour Change:				
1. Made more effort to avoid mosquito bites	31.5%	±3.1%	36.9%	±4.9%
2. Have always tried to avoid mosquito bites	31.7%	±3.1%	25.9%	±4.5%
3. WNV made no difference in their behaviour	27.6%	±3.0%	26.7%	±4.5%

Source: RRFSS (May – September 2004, June – September 2005)

***Confidence Intervals**

Response estimates are accompanied by 95% confidence intervals. This means that the true value is within this range 19 times out of 20. The difference between estimates is statistically significant if the confidence intervals do not overlap.

Awareness

In 2005, 91.9% (± 2.6%) of Toronto respondents had heard about West Nile Virus. The decrease from 2004 [95.5% ± (1.4%)] was not statistically significant.

Transmission

In 2005, 75.1% (± 4.2%) of respondents knew that WNV is transmitted to humans by mosquitoes. The decrease from 2004 [80.8% (± 2.6%)] was not statistically significant.

Risk Groups

In 2005, 22.9% (± 4.1%) of respondents were aware that older people are the most at risk of becoming seriously ill from WNV. The decrease from 2004 [24.7% (± 2.8%)] was not significant. In both years, a higher proportion of respondents felt there was no real difference based on age. The result for 2005 [38.8% (± 4.7%)] was unchanged from 2004 [38.8% (± 3.2%)].

The following results pertain to those respondents who had heard of WNV:

Perceived Risk

In 2005, 17.8% (± 3.9%) of respondents who had heard about WNV felt they were at risk of becoming ill from WNV. The decrease from 2004 [20.2% ± 2.7%)] was not statistically significant.

Behaviour Change

In 2005, 36.9% (± 4.9%) of respondents who had heard about WNV reported they had made more of an effort to avoid mosquitoes, up from 31.5% (± 3.1%) in 2004. In 2005, 25.9% (± 4.5%) reported that they have always tried to avoid mosquito bites, down from 31.7% (± 3.1%) in 2004. Neither of these changes was statistically significant. In 2005, 26.7% (± 4.5%) reported that hearing about WNV made no difference in their behaviour. This was similar to findings in 2004 when 27.6% (± 3.0%) reported no difference.

Personal and Household Protective Measures

Results for the questions related to how people protect themselves and their household environment from WNV will be released in the next edition of the Health Status News.

Health Status News is an ongoing series of information updates that summarize new data and events related to Toronto's health status.

For more information on this issue, please contact:

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The Toronto Public Health Metrics and Planning unit measures the health of Toronto's populations and the performance of TPH programs to help guide the organization on its mission.

For more information on Toronto's health status, please visit our web site at: www.toronto.ca/health/map