

Spring 2008

## **Information for the Homeless and Underhoused**

### **What is West Nile Virus?**

West Nile Virus (WNV) is a mosquito-borne virus that infects birds and other animals and humans. The risk of infection is low, and fewer than 1% of people infected become seriously ill.

### **What is the risk to homeless/underhoused people?**

Mosquitoes are most active at night, especially during dusk and dawn. Therefore, people who sleep outdoors and are outside in the early morning and early evening are at increased risk of exposure to mosquitoes. These individuals should be aware of the increased risk and take precautions. Those over the age of 55 and people with compromised immune systems are at higher risk of developing complications if they become infected with WNV. This includes people with chronic illnesses such as alcoholism, cancer, diabetes or heart disease.

### **What are the symptoms of WNV?**

The majority of people infected with WNV show no symptoms. About one in five people infected with WNV have mild, flu-like symptoms such as fever, headaches, and body aches that may be accompanied by a skin rash and swollen glands. Symptoms usually occur three to 15 days after being bitten by an infected mosquito. Symptoms of severe infection include stiff neck, confusion, severe headache, and sudden sensitivity to light. Anyone suffering symptoms of severe WNV infection including stiff neck, confusion, severe headache, or sudden sensitivity to light should seek medical attention.

### **What personal precautions can people who are homeless or underhoused take?**

- Cover up as much as possible and tuck pants into socks for extra protection.
- Try to wear light-coloured clothing, including long-sleeved shirts, or a jacket and long pants.
- When wearing extra clothing, drink lots of water to reduce the risk of heat stress.
- Avoid areas with a large number of mosquitoes, such as ravines or areas with a lot of bushes and trees, especially in the early morning and early evening.
- Whenever possible, do not stay outside at dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are most active.

## **What about insect repellent?**

- Toronto Public Health recommends repellents containing 10% DEET or less for adults. Repellents containing DEET concentrations of 30% or less are considered safe by Health Canada for adult use.
- Always follow instructions on the label.
- The repellent should only be applied to exposed skin and clothing.
- Use sparingly and never use over cuts, wounds, sunburn or irritated skin.
- Avoid using DEET on a regular basis. Use only when necessary.
- DEET is harmful if swallowed – seek medical attention if this occurs.
- **BE SURE TO WASH REPELLENT OFF DAILY.**
- Some repellents containing alternatives to DEET such as products with soyabean oil, or pmenthane-3, 8-diol are approved by Health Canada. Check product instructions as some products are not recommended for children under three. Consult a physician for more information.

## **Can repellent and sunscreen be used together?**

Insect repellent may reduce the effectiveness of sunscreen. When using them together, sunscreen should be applied 20 minutes before outdoor activities, followed by repellent just before going into an area with mosquitoes. Cover up and wear a hat for protection from the sun. Products that combine insect repellent and sunscreen are not recommended.

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