

Frequently Asked Questions About Dead Birds and West Nile Virus (WNV)

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What do dead birds have to do with WNV?

Because West Nile virus (WNV) causes death in certain kinds of birds, especially crows and blue jays, reporting dead birds has proven to be a good way to detect WNV activity in an area. If you would like to report a dead bird in your area, call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) Public Health Information Line at 866-MASS-WNV (866-627-7968). While most dead birds will not be collected and tested for WNV, keeping track of their locations plays an important role in directing further bird, mosquito and human surveillance activities. The information gathered from these surveillance activities may help to identify areas at increased risk for human WNV disease.

What information do I have to give, if I call to report a dead bird?

When you call to report a dead bird, you will be asked the following questions:

- Your name and telephone number
- Town and street address where the bird was found
- Type of bird (examples, crow, blue jay, pigeon)
- Date bird was found

In most cases you will then be instructed on how to dispose of a dead bird. Double-bag the bird carcass by using gloves, a shovel or plastic bags on hands and placing it in the trash. You should then wash your hands. There is no evidence that a person can get WNV from handling infected birds; however in general you should avoid touching dead animals with your bare hands.

Certain birds will be of higher interest for surveillance purposes: In most cases, testing will be restricted to crows, blue jays and robins that have been dead for less than 24 hours and have no visible trauma. In these cases, you will be asked questions about the condition of the bird to determine if it is a good candidate to test for WNV. These questions include:

- Are the eyes sunken in?
- Are there flies or maggots on the bird?
- Does the bird show signs of injury? (struck by a vehicle, killed by an animal, etc.)

If the bird is suitable for testing the operator will assign a tracking number, and arrange for the bird to be sent to MDPH for testing. Each town has provided instructions to MDPH to assist in collecting specimens. These include residents calling their local board of health to arrange for the bird to be picked up or residents transporting birds to another location where they will be collected and sent to MDPH. If the resident is to transport the bird, the operators will provide specific information on how to safely transport the bird. Please note that if you call after business hours or on the weekend, you might have to wait until the next business day before the bird can be transported.

Why are you only testing certain dead birds, like crows and blue jays? Don't other birds become infected with WNV?

It is possible for other bird species to become infected with WNV. However, data from Massachusetts and throughout the country suggest that crows and blue jays are much more susceptible to WNV infection than other species and are the most likely to die from WNV. They have proven to be most useful for providing the information needed.

If you're already testing my dead bird for West Nile virus (WNV), why can't you test it for EEE?

Birds, particularly birds infected with EEE virus, usually survive the infection, making dead bird EEE virus monitoring not productive.

My dead bird tested negative for WNV. What did it die of?

There are many causes of death in birds and often it is impossible to know exactly why a wild animal has died. Besides all the bacterial or viral diseases wild birds can have, other reasons could be the bird flew into a window, was killed by a cat or dog, or consumed poisonous fertilizer or pesticide.

How can I safely dispose of the dead bird in my backyard?

You should avoid directly touching any dead bird, or any other wild animal, with your bare hands. Double-bag the bird carcass by using gloves, a shovel or plastic bags on hands and place it in the trash. You should then wash your hands.

Isn't it unsanitary or dangerous to put a dead bird in the garbage?

Our recommendation to dispose of dead birds via double bagging and placing in the trash is consistent with the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recommendation for dead bird disposal. You should avoid touching a live or dead bird or their droppings with your bare hands since there may be harmful germs present. There is no evidence that a person can get WNV from handling infected birds. WNV is transmitted to humans from the bite of an infected mosquito. If you are concerned about WNV illness than you should take precautions to prevent mosquito bites.

My dog/cat had a dead bird in its mouth. Will it get WNV?

WNV is transmitted to humans and other mammals through the bite of an infected mosquito. There have been no documented cases of a dog or cat becoming infected after eating a dead infected animal. Even if bitten by an infected mosquito, WNV infection does not appear to cause serious illness in most dogs or cats.

Why are you only testing dead birds for WNV? Why not other animals like squirrels, dogs, etc.?

MDPH performs routine WNV testing on dead birds because they are the major reservoir (meaning where the virus normally lives and multiplies) for WNV and the best indicator of WNV activity in an area. Mosquitoes are routinely tested because they are the main way the virus is spread to humans. While small mammals may become infected with WNV, they are not believed to play a major role in the cycle of transmission to humans.

Although routine surveillance is not currently occurring in small mammals, MDPH does perform some WNV testing in small mammals that are submitted for rabies testing. Small mammals that have a history of neurologic symptoms and test negative for rabies are tested for WNV when the laboratory workload permits. To date all such tests have been WNV negative. Larger mammals, particular horses, have been found to be WNV positive in Massachusetts.

I found a dead bird in my pool. Is it safe to swim in?

WNV is most commonly spread to humans through the bite of an infected mosquito. There is no evidence to suggest that you can contract WNV or avian flu from swimming in a pool. As a general precaution, it is good practice to keep up with the chemical maintenance requirements of your pool, particularly when a dead animal has been in the water.

Why do some areas stop collecting dead birds?

Some towns suspend testing in dead birds because they have established that the West Nile virus is in an area and additional testing will not reveal any more information. Shifting resources away from testing of dead birds allows those resources to be devoted elsewhere, such as for disease prevention and control activities.

There have been a lot of dead birds in my neighborhood. Why aren't you spraying my town for mosquitoes?

Decisions about mosquito control methods are made by the local board of health within a city or town. Some towns may be served by a mosquito control project. A community's decision to spray may depend on a number of factors such as the results of mosquito surveillance efforts, the results of testing of dead birds for the virus and the number of dead birds reported by the public. Your local board of health can be found in the phone directory under government. To find out if a mosquito control project serves your town, visit www.mass.gov/agr/mosquito/districts.htm or ask your local board of health.

Where can I get more information about WNV or other diseases spread by mosquitoes?

Visit the MDPH arbovirus website at www.mass.gov/dph/wmv/wmv1.htm or call the MDPH Public Health Information Line at (866) 627-7968. People experiencing illness should contact their health provider.

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