Frequently Asked Questions about Dead Birds and WNV

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 305 South Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

What do dead birds have to do with WNV?

Because West Nile virus (WNV) causes the death of certain kinds of birds, especially crows and blue jays, reporting and testing of dead birds has historically been a way to detect WNV activity in an area. In recent years however, the tracking and testing of dead birds has become less useful for monitoring WNV activity. Many other states have also discontinued dead bird reporting and testing. Mosquito collection and testing provides a more reliable indication of current WNV activity. This is where monitoring efforts will be focused.

Do I need to report dead birds anymore?

No. Dead birds are no longer being tested for WNV and do not need to be reported to MDPH.

However, certain situations should be reported to other agencies.

- Report sick, dying, or recently dead waterfowl (duck and geese), shorebirds (sandpipers, plovers) or other waterbirds (herons) found at any location(s) to the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MDFW), Westborough Field Headquarters at 508-389-6300 or the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) at 413-253-2403.

  Larger bird die-offs of other species can be reported to the closest district office of the MDFW.
  Western Wildlife District in Pittsfield—413-447-9789
  Connecticut Valley Wildlife District in Belchertown—413-323-7632
  Central Wildlife District in West Boylston—508-835-3607
  Northeast Wildlife District in Acton—978-263-4347
  Southeast Wildlife District in Buzzards Bay—508-759-3406

- Poultry flocks (i.e., chickens) experiencing sudden mortality, respiratory symptoms, or swollen heads should be reported to the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources at 617-626-1795.

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 then 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.

Do you test animals like squirrels or dogs for WNV?

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, particularly 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 spread to humans through the bite of an infected mosquito. There is no evidence to suggest that you can contract WNV, or any other disease of birds, by entering a swimming pool which has contained a dead bird. As a general precaution, it is good practice to keep up the chemical maintenance requirements of your pool, particularly when a dead animal has been in the water.

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

Decisions about mosquito control 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. 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 website at www.mass.gov/dph/wnv or call the MDPH Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800. People experiencing illness should contact their health provider.

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