

Is Your Pet Bird at Risk for WNV?

What you need to know to keep your bird safe from West Nile Virus this summer.

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Summer is rolling in and dragging along with it warm, humid weather – the perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes and West Nile Virus.

From 1999 to 2007, West Nile Virus was reported to be detected in dead birds from 317 species, according to the Center for Disease Control (CDC). Although most commonly found in crows, jays and other wild birds, traces were found in domesticated birds as well, including the African grey, budgerigar (parakeet), cockatoo and several species of lory and finch. (Click for a complete list of birds or visit the CDC's website.)

According to Walter Boyce of the Wildlife Health Center at University of California, Davis, pet birds can contract the virus from mosquitoes just like humans can. To help lower your pet bird's chance of getting bitten, he recommends keeping it indoors or in a mosquito-proof enclosure, especially around at dawn, dusk and night. The CDC also recommends eliminating standing water around your house where mosquitoes tend to breed.

However, if owners take care to protect their pet birds, there is a low risk that they will contract the virus, said Adrian Whittington, DVM, of the North State Animal and Bird Hospital in Jackson, Miss. Most cases he has seen of West Nile Virus in his office have been in raptors – eagles, hawks and owls – which live outdoors.

"I've had one or two that have come in every year that present the clinical signs," Whittington said.

At this point, he has not seen any pet birds in his office that have tested positive for the virus. He said that if your pet bird displays neurological weaknesses, such as the inability to sit on its perch, veterinarians can perform a blood or DNA test for West Nile Virus.

"But it's not possible to identify West Nile Virus by itself without a blood test," he cautioned. A variety of problems can contribute to neurological symptoms.

Fortunately, neither you nor your bird can contract West Nile Virus by merely touching a carrier of the virus. If you find a dead bird, the CDC recommends calling your local health department about how to report and dispose of the body. As in the case of all dead animals, avoid touching the bird with your bare hands. However, the CDC has no evidence of humans contracting the virus through the handling of a dead or infected bird.

In 2007, the CDC received reports of 3,630 humans affected by the virus. This year, eight total cases have been reported in Arizona, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Texas.

About 80 percent of humans who carry West Nile Virus experience no symptoms, according to the CDC, while 20 percent experience mild symptoms, such as headaches, fever, nausea and vomiting. Doctors have no specific treatment for the symptoms, and they usually pass within a few days to a few weeks.

One in 150 people develop more serious symptoms. Those experiencing severe headaches, confusion, muscle weakness or other symptoms listed on the CDC website might need hospitalization.

Contact your local health department for more information about West Nile Virus in your area.