

Protect yourself against West Nile virus

When heading outdoors this summer, you'll want to avoid mosquito bites. Your risk of becoming infected with the West Nile virus through a mosquito bite is greatest during the Canadian mosquito season (from mid-April to October).

Protect yourself and your kids by using a bug repellent that contains the chemical known as DEET. DEET-containing products come in a variety of strengths, and the right strength to use depends on the age of the person who will be using it. Adults should use the maximum strength of 30% DEET bug repellent on clothes or exposed skin. Children should only use products that contain less than 10% DEET, and these products should never be applied to a child's face or hands. Apply the under-10% DEET insect repellent once daily for children aged 6 months to 2 years. Children aged 2 to 12 years can use it up to 3 times per day. Never use any strength of DEET on infants under 6 months of age because their new, delicate skin absorbs chemicals too easily.¹

Although studies haven't shown DEET to pose a risk, pregnant or breast-feeding women may want to consider DEET alternatives. These include natural, oil-based repellents made from citronella or soybean oil. Oil of lemon eucalyptus can be as effective as DEET when used at similar strengths. Products containing essential oils need to be tested for skin sensitivity – try them out first on a small area on your inner elbow to check for irritation.

You'll also need to apply these products frequently because they tend to not be as effective as chemical-based repellents.

Dress right! When you're outdoors, wear light-coloured clothes including pants and long-sleeved shirts. And since mosquitoes are most active from dusk to dawn, enjoy the summer weather inside a screened-in patio or enclosure during these hours. Seal up any holes in window and door screens.

Making your area less mosquito-friendly will also reduce your risk of getting bitten. Mosquitoes love stagnant or standing water on your lawn or in your bird bath. Regularly (twice a week) drain rain barrels, bird-baths, swimming-pool covers, eavestroughs, flowerpots, and planters. Keep wheelbarrows and wading pools overturned when you're not using them. You can also buy an aerator to keep the surface of a swimming pool's water moving and prevent larvae from being deposited.

Mosquitoes also like rotting fruits and leaves, so immediately clean up and throw away lawn cuttings, raked leaves, and fruit or berries that fall from trees. Place these in sealed garbage bags. Turn over compost piles regularly, and remove dense shrubbery. You may wish to consider buying a product that repels mosquitoes by producing sounds that imitate the mosquito's natural enemies such as dragonflies, frogs, and beetles. Installing bat- and bird-houses will also make mosquitoes feel less welcome!

¹ http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/wn-no/repellents-insectifuge_e.html