

St. Louis Encephalitis (SLE)

Public Information Sheet

What is St. Louis encephalitis?

Encephalitis means “inflammation of the brain.” St. Louis encephalitis (SLE) is caused by a virus and it spreads to people through the bite of infected mosquitoes. SLE causes disease mostly in humans and birds.

What are the symptoms of St. Louis encephalitis?

Most people with SLE infection have no symptoms or only mild flu-like symptoms. However, some people may develop more severe symptoms including headache, high fever, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, seizures, and/or paralysis. The overall death rate is 5 to 15 percent.

Who is most at risk for St. Louis encephalitis?

People who engage in outdoor work and recreational activities in areas that have identified active cases are at a higher risk of becoming infected. Persons over the age of 50 seem to be at the greatest risk for developing severe SLE when infected with the virus.

Is St. Louis encephalitis a problem in West Virginia?

West Virginia has not reported cases of SLE in recent years. SLE has been found in West Virginia in the past, mostly during the 19070’s.

How is St. Louis encephalitis spread?

SLE is transmitted to humans by the bite of an infected mosquito. You cannot get SLE from another person.

How can I protect my family from St. Louis encephalitis?

Remove standing water to get rid of mosquitoes:

- Get rid of old tires and trash around your home.
- Punch holes in the bottoms of trash barrels so they don’t hold water.
- At least once or twice a week, clean and empty water from flowerpots, birdbaths, swimming pool covers, buckets, barrels and cans.

Infectious Disease Epidemiology

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- Check for clogged rain gutters and clean them out so they drain properly.
- Maintain swimming pools or drain them completely.

Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants whenever you are outdoors.

Avoid outside activities when mosquitoes are active.

Use insect repellent on bare skin.

- DEET, picaridin, oil of lemon eucalyptus and IR3535 are effective.
- Follow package directions carefully.
- Apply sparingly to children and wash them with soap and water when they come indoors. Avoid application to the hands and face of young children.

Make sure doors and screens are bug tight.

Contact your doctor if you feel ill.

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