

NEWS RELEASE

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For More Information, Contact:
Michelle Feist
Division of Disease Control
Phone: 701.328.2378
E-mail: mafeist@nd.gov

Mother Raises Awareness of West Nile Virus

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH) and the parents of a child who became seriously ill from West Nile virus (WNV) have partnered together to raise awareness of how severe this disease can be for people of any age. Benny Howling Wolf was just three years old when he contracted WNV in 2016. Benny and his family have been working hard every day to overcome the remaining effects from his severe WNV infection.

“Benny was a perfect little boy who loved to play outdoors, spend time with his five siblings, and listen to his grandmother read him stories at night,” said Jessica Howling Wolf, Benny’s mother. “After spending two and a half months in the hospital from his WNV infection, Benny now goes to three therapies a day, three times a week. Benny has survived and overcome something that could have been devastating, but is now becoming a person I only knew existed in the movies, a hero.”

The NDDoH does not release information about people that might identify them in order to comply with federal privacy laws. In this case, Jessica Howling Wolf wanted to publicly acknowledge her son’s survival story to raise awareness about the seriousness of WNV disease, testing for WNV in people with meningitis and/or encephalitis, advocate for a human WNV vaccine, and connect with other families affected by WNV.

Most people infected with West Nile virus experience no symptoms or have only mild symptoms, such as fever and headache. However, the more serious form of the illness, West Nile neuroinvasive disease, can cause high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, altered mental status and death. People over age 50 or those who have underlying health issues are at greater risk for developing the neuroinvasive disease.

“West Nile virus disease can affect anyone and cause serious illness regardless of age,” said Michelle Feist, WNV program manager with the NDDoH. “In 2017, 62 North Dakota residents tested positive for West Nile virus. Cases ranged in age from eleven years to older than 60 years. Twenty-two of the cases were hospitalized and two people died.”

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The NDDoH recommends residents take these precautions to avoid mosquito bites:

- Use insect repellents containing ingredients registered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency – such as DEET, picaridin, IR3535, oil of lemon eucalyptus (or PMD) or permethrin – and apply according to manufacturer’s instructions
- Wear protective clothing, such as long-sleeved shirts and pants
- Limit outdoor activities between dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are most likely to bite
- Eliminate stagnant water in containers around homes where mosquitoes can lay their eggs (such as buckets, flowerpots, old tires, wading pools and birdbaths)
- Keep mosquitoes from entering your home by installing or repairing screens on windows and doors
- Keep the grass around your home trimmed

Common symptoms of WNV include fever, headache, body aches, and rash. People with more severe illness may experience symptoms such as stiff neck, confusion, paralysis, coma, and even death. Fortunately, most people infected with WNV develop the less severe form of the disease or experience no symptoms at all.

For more information about West Nile virus, contact Michelle Feist, North Dakota Department of Health, at 701.328.2378 or visit www.ndhealth.gov/wnv.

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