

# What it's like to have West Nile Virus &hellip; on Stage



David Holmes, 2012-05-09

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I don't mind dying onstage — when you do a lot of public speaking it's good to have sessions where you just don't connect or where the audience is hostile because it makes you work harder next time. This was different though. I was in an auditorium in Chicago starting an hour-long security talk. I'd been feeling awful for almost a week, and hoping that I'd get over it before this moment. I must have looked terrible. I was pale, sweating and had rash over my entire body. By the way, that's literally my worst nightmare, having to do public speaking with a facial rash. I know, I know, it seems like a really specific and simultaneously unlikely phobia, but here I was, experiencing it.

*Fun fact: this is the worst year for West Nile Virus since it was initially reported in the US in 1999.*

I lost my voice, sending me into a panic. Drinking water didn't help. The pity from the audience was palpable. Someone gave me some more water, but that didn't help my voice come back either. Finally I got some coffee and was able to struggle through the presentation. Standing was an effort, so I sort of hugged the podium and croaked into the microphone for an hour. Honestly, it was absolutely the worst presentation I've ever given, and even though I thought I was dying I felt bad for putting the audience through that.



Exhausted after a talk, coming down with West Nile

Later that day, minutes before I was to board a flight to the next city, I was convinced by a nurse not to get on the plane to check myself into a local hospital. My awesome co-workers assured me that the road-show would continue without me and told me to take care of myself.

At the hospital I described my symptoms to a series of pretty nurses and then an ER triage doctor.

- I was fatigued to the point of almost not being able to walk.
- I had headaches, which I never get.
- I had a rash everywhere.
- I had a fever but no respiratory symptoms.
- My joints ached and my eyes had hurt.

The doctor ran some blood tests and came back to my little room. He looked intrigued. "Could be a bunch of things. Could be HIV. It could also be West Nile Virus." I started pulling for West Nile.

*Fun Fact: [Dogs and cats](#) can be infected by WNV, but never show symptoms.*

They kept me in the hospital for two days while they ran all kinds of tests. You have no idea how thankful I was that the hospital had good wireless and that I had a new iPad. Rather than wait for all the tests complete, I convinced them to discharge me and I boarded a flight home. A few days later I got the call from my doctor that the last outstanding test, the one for West Nile Virus, had come back positive. He seemed very cheerful about it: "***You're my first West Nile patient this year!***" The Larimer county health department of Colorado called me the next day and asked if I could pinpoint where I think I got infected. They seemed to want to hear that it wasn't Larimer County. I told them that I'd been in Chicago, but that I was pretty sure I had picked up the virus on the other side of Colorado (in Montrose county, where there has just been a couple of WNV deaths).

After about a week, the rash went away, as did most of the other symptoms except occasional fatigue. I hear I may be dragging for a couple of months. I'm up and about, and I've told a couple of women in bars that "according to the CDC, I am West Nile case #21 in Colorado" but it has gotten me nowhere. I guess I still have no game, West Nile or not.

*Fun fact: about 70 of the reported cases this year have died, which is approximately 5%.*

Has this experience changed me at all? Coming down with a disease that has at least a 95% survival rate doesn't exactly qualify as a "near miss" but it does make you stop and think. In the hospital, I was lamenting the fact that I hadn't updated my will recently. I am not afraid of dying, but I want it to be as neat and tidy as possible for those around me. I'm updating my will now and my powers of attorney. I think I'll start telling people I love them instead of just saying goodbye.

And at least I have an interesting little story for the next audience that I present to.

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