



Avian Influenza

Frequently Asked Questions

There has been a great deal of discussion of late about avian influenza or ‘bird flu’ and the potential it holds for a world-wide epidemic. Some in the scientific community believe such an epidemic, or pandemic, is inevitable and might rival the catastrophic ‘Spanish Flu’ of 1918-19 that claimed millions of lives around the world.

It is important to understand what avian flu or ‘bird flu’ is and to put into perspective the current threat to public health.

The following information is intended to inform you of the current situation so that you can make informed decisions as they relate to your health.

What is Avian Influenza?

Avian influenza, or ‘bird flu,’ is a contagious disease of animals caused by viruses that **normally affect only birds**, and less commonly pigs. Avian influenza viruses are highly species-specific, birds to birds for instance, but on rare occasions have been known to cross the species barrier to affect humans.

In domestic poultry, infection with avian influenza viruses causes two main forms of the disease which are distinguished by low and high extremes of virulence. Low pathogenic forms of the virus can cause only mild symptoms (ruffled feathers, a drop in egg production) and may go unnoticed. The highly pathogenic form is far more virulent often spreading rapidly throughout poultry flocks and is almost always fatal to the infected fowl.

There are many of Influenza A viruses. The type of virus usually implicated with recent outbreaks of avian influenza in poultry flocks is designated **H5N1**.

What is the present risk for humans?

There have been about 117 cases of avian flu affecting humans throughout the world during this most recent outbreak. Most cases have occurred in Asian countries and all have been transmitted directly from chickens or other birds to humans.



There are two concerns about the risks to humans posed by avian flu. First, when the disease passes directly from poultry to humans the resulting illness is usually severe and can cause death.

A second risk of greater concern is the virus may continue to mutate into a form that is highly infectious for humans and could spread easily from person to person. Such a mutation would be necessary before a world-wide pandemic could occur.

To date, only four Asian countries (Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand) have reported human cases of avian flu.

Do migratory birds spread avian influenza viruses?

The role of migratory birds in spreading viruses is not fully understood at this time. Migratory water fowl has been thought to be the natural reservoir of all influenza A viruses. Recent events suggest that some migratory birds are now directly spreading H5N1 virus. Further spread of the virus to poultry flocks is expected.

Current outbreaks of avian influenza, which began in Southeast Asia in 2003, are the largest and most severe on record. The virus has affected flocks in many more countries, simultaneously, than at any other time in history.

From December 2003 through February 2004, avian flu caused by the H5N1 virus has been reported in eight Asian nations including: Republic of Korea, Viet Nam, Japan, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, China and Indonesia. Recent reports suggest the virus has spread to eastern Europe (Romania and Russia).

How do people become infected with avian flu?

Direct contact with infected poultry or surfaces and objects contaminated with the feces of infected poultry is the main route of human infection. Most human cases have occurred in areas where small poultry flocks are allowed to roam freely sharing living spaces with humans. Exposure to the virus is believed to be greatest during slaughtering, butchering and de-feathering of infected poultry and preparation for cooking. **There is no evidence that properly cooked poultry or eggs can be a source of human infection.**

Does the avian flu virus spread easily from birds to humans?

No. Though more than 100 human cases have occurred in the current outbreak, this is a very small number compared to the huge number of birds affected and the opportunities for exposure in those areas where backyard flocks of poultry are common. It is not presently understood why some people become infected while others are not following similar exposures.

There is a concern that over time the virus will mutate making human to human transmission possible.



How serious is the risk of a pandemic occurring?

The risk of pandemic influenza is serious but not immediate. With the H5N1 avian flu virus firmly entrenched in a number of Asian countries the risk of more human cases will persist. With each human case the chance that the virus will adapt so that it becomes more easily transmissible increases.

The most important warning signal that a pandemic is about to start is when there are clusters of reported human cases, closely related in time and place, which suggests human transmission is taking place.

What is the status of vaccine development and production?

Vaccines effective against a pandemic virus are not yet available. Although a vaccine against H5N1 virus is under development in several countries, no vaccine is currently available for commercial development.

What drugs are available for treatment?

Two drugs, Tamiflu and Relenza are prescription medications that can reduce the severity and duration of seasonal influenza as well as avian flu if administered within 48 hours after the onset of symptoms.

What can I do to reduce my risk?

There is no reason to be concerned about eating chicken, eggs or other poultry products providing they are thoroughly and properly cooked.

The best way people can reduce their risk of getting **seasonal flu** is by getting a flu shot. Practice good respiratory hygiene by covering all coughs and sneezes. Eat a balanced diet and get plenty of rest and exercise in order to keep your resistance up. Avoid contact with people who exhibit symptoms of flu or respiratory infection. If you have symptoms of flu, stay home from work or school.