

Is it Time to Push the Panic Button?

What is avian influenza (bird flu)?

Avian influenza is an infection caused by avian (bird) influenza (flu) viruses. These flu viruses occur naturally among birds. Wild birds world-wide carry the viruses in their intestines, but usually do not get sick from them. However, avian influenza is very contagious among birds and can make some domesticated birds, including chickens, ducks, and turkeys, very sick and kill them.



Most people use "avian flu" to mean H5N1 which is a subtype of the avian flu. This is the virus that is a current pandemic threat. It is one of the few avian viruses that have crossed the species barrier to infect humans. Outbreaks of avian influenza H5N1 occurred among poultry in 8 countries in Asia (Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam) during late 2003 and early 2004. At that time, more than 100 million birds in the affected countries either died from the disease or were killed in order to try to control the outbreaks. By March 2004, the outbreak was reported to be under control.

Since late June 2004, however, new outbreaks of influenza H5N1 among poultry and wild birds have been reported in countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Near East. Human cases of influenza A (H5N1) infection have been reported in Azerbaijan, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Iraq, Thailand, Turkey, and Vietnam.

How do people become infected with avian influenza viruses?

H5N1 virus does not usually infect people, however more than 170 human cases have been reported. Most cases of avian influenza infection in humans have resulted from direct or close contact with infected poultry (e.g., domesticated chicken, ducks and turkeys) or surfaces contaminated with secretions and excretions from infected birds. The spread of avian flu viruses from an ill person to another person has been reported very rarely, and transmission has not been observed to continue beyond one person. Nonetheless, because all influenza viruses have the ability to change, scientists are concerned that H5N1 virus one day could be able to infect humans and spread easily from one person to another. Because these viruses do not commonly infect humans, there is little or no immune protection against them in the human population.



How is infection with H5N1 virus in humans treated?

Most H5N1 viruses that have caused human illness and death appear to be resistant to amantadine and rimantadine, (two antiviral medications commonly used for treatment of patients with influenza). Two other antiviral medications, oseltamivir and zanamavir, would probably work to treat influenza caused by H5N1 virus, but additional studies are needed to demonstrate their current and ongoing effectiveness.

There currently is no commercially available vaccine to protect humans against the H5N1 virus that is being detected in Asia and Europe. However, vaccine development efforts are taking place.



What are the symptoms of avian influenza in humans?

Symptoms of avian influenza in humans have ranged from typical human flu-like symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches) to eye infections, pneumonia, severe respiratory diseases (such as acute respiratory distress syndrome), and other severe and life-threatening complications. The symptoms of avian influenza may depend on which specific virus subtype and strain caused the infection.

What if I find a dead bird or have a concern?

The Department of Agriculture now have a helpline number. If you have queries or concerns it is recommended that you contact them on the number below.

Avian Influenza Helpline 1890-252-283