

Avian Influenza – H5N1

What is Avian Influenza?

Avian influenza is an infectious disease of birds. This virus can infect chickens, turkeys, ducks, as well as a wide variety of other birds. Each year, there is a flu season for birds just as there is for humans and, as with people, some forms of the flu are worse than others.

The virus can be spread from birds to people as a result of extensive direct contact with infected birds. Open-air markets, where eggs and birds are often sold in crowded and unsanitary conditions, are hotbeds of infection and spread the disease into the wider community. Cock fighting has also been implicated in the spread of bird flu. Humans may pick up the virus through close contact with sick birds or contaminated surfaces. An ailing bird can shed the virus in its feathers as well as in droppings, and some people have contracted bird flu simply by touching an infected bird.

The strain that is currently of concern in Southeast Asia and Europe is the H5N1 HPAI virus. Since 2003, more than 100 human H5N1 cases have been diagnosed in Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia and China. Of those cases, more than half have died as a result of the virus. Concerns about public health relate to the potential for the virus to mutate into a form that could easily spread from person to person. In the worst case scenario, this could give rise to a pandemic.

Prevention of Avian Influenza

In the event of a pandemic, certain public health measures may be important to help contain or limit the spread of infection as effectively as possible. The following actions could include:

- Treating sick and exposed people with antiviral medications
- Isolating sick people in hospitals, homes, or other facilities
- Identifying and quarantining exposed people
- Closing schools and workplaces as needed
- Canceling public events
- Restricting travel

In addition, individuals should protect themselves by:

- Getting seasonal flu shots
- Washing hands frequently with soap and water
- Staying away from people who are sick
- Staying home if sick

Avian influenza is not transmitted through cooked food. To date, no evidence indicates that anyone has become infected following the consumption of properly cooked poultry or poultry products, even when these foods were contaminated with the H5N1 virus. Eating chicken and other poultry should pose no health hazard if proper precautions are taken. (Please see “5 Keys to safer food” on back of this sheet.)