

What is avian influenza (bird flu)?

Media attention has recently been focused on avian influenza, also known as “bird flu”. Bird flu is an infection caused by avian (bird) influenza (flu) viruses. This is different from the yearly flu infection that most people know. Avian flu viruses occur naturally. Wild birds carry the viruses, but usually do not get sick from them. Bird flu can make some domesticated birds, including chickens, ducks, and turkeys, very sick. It may even kill them.

Most often, these viruses do not infect humans. Exceptions have occurred in people who have very close contact with infected birds or their environment.

What is the H5N1 bird flu that has been reported in Asia and Europe?

Outbreaks of influenza H5N1 occurred among poultry in eight countries in Asia in 2003 and 2004. At that time, more than 100 million birds either died from the disease or were killed to try to control the outbreak. Despite these efforts, in late June 2004, new outbreaks of the virus in poultry were reported in other countries in Asia. Recently, influenza H5N1 has been reported among poultry in Turkey and Romania. Control of the disease in poultry is expected to take several years.

What is the risk to humans from bird flu?

The H5N1 virus does not usually infect humans. According to the World Health Organization, during the current outbreak of bird flu, human cases have been reported in Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Nearly all of the human cases reported have been in people who have had very close contact with ill or infected poultry.

The current risk to Americans from the H5N1 bird flu outbreak in Asia is low. The H5N1 virus has not been found in the United States. It is safe to prepare and eat poultry and poultry products without fear of getting the illness.

At this time, the H5N1 virus is not easily spread from person to person. However, all viruses have the ability to change. For this reason, scientists are concerned that the virus could one day change and infect humans. Because there would have been little or no immune protection against the changed virus in the human population, the changed virus could spread easily from one person to another.

A global influenza pandemic occurs when a new subtype of influenza, that can cause serious human disease, infects populations around the world. Influenza pandemics have occurred in the past. It is impossible to predict whether the virus changes needed for H5N1 to be easily passed between people will occur.

What does the CDC recommend regarding the H5N1 bird flu outbreak?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have distributed alerts to health departments about how to detect, diagnose, and prevent the spread of avian influenza A (H5N1). At this time, there is no vaccine that protects humans against the H5N1 virus. Efforts to develop an effective vaccine are under way.

The CDC currently advises that travelers to countries with known outbreaks of influenza A (H5N1) avoid poultry farms, contact with animals in live food markets, and any surfaces that appear to be contaminated with poultry or animal droppings. There are no travel restrictions to affected countries at this time.



**Saint Patrick Parish
Health Care Ministry
118 South Broadway
Lawrence, MA 01843
978-683-9416**

References:

www.cdc.gov/flu
www.mass.gov/dph/flu
www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza