

Bird Flu: What You Need To Know

Bird flu, also known as avian influenza, is a strain of the flu virus that normally affects wild birds, but can infect domestic birds and humans as well. While outbreaks among humans are rare, they're not unheard of - the most recent one occurred in Asia in 2006.

What is Bird Flu?

It is a disease related to the familiar type of influenza that affects the respiratory systems

of humans and other animals. Bird flu is common in the intestines of wild birds all over the globe, although they rarely become sick by it. However, it is very contagious, and some domestic birds - such as chickens and turkeys - can become ill and die from it.

Infected birds can spread the disease through their saliva, nasal secretions, and feces. Other birds become infected when they have contact with these birds or their secretions. Infections in domestic poultry can lead to two main forms of the disease: low pathogenic, which may go undetected and usually causes only mild symptoms (such as ruffled feathers and a drop in egg production), or highly pathogenic, which spreads more rapidly through flocks of poultry. This kind of infection can affect multiple organs and has a 90-100% chance of killing the infected animal, often within two days.

Risk to Humans

Since November 2003, nearly 400 cases of human infection by a highly pathogenic form of bird flu, influenza A (H5N1), have been reported by



more than a dozen countries in Asia, Africa, the Pacific, Europe and Middle-East. Highly pathogenic avian influenza A (H5N1) viruses have never been detected among wild birds, domestic poultry, or people in the US. Most of these cases have occurred from direct or close contact with infected poultry or contaminated surfaces. While a few cases of human-to-human spread of H5N1 virus have occurred, infection from person to person has been rare, limited and short-term. There are currently no travel restrictions for countries with previous outbreaks, though be advised about importing bird products from these areas, or coming into contact with live birds.

Of the few cases of bird flu infection in humans, none have ever been known to result from consuming properly handled, cleaned, and cooked bird products. Even if poultry and eggs were to be contaminated with the virus, proper preparation and cooking would eliminate it safely.

Treating Bird Flu

It's been found that medicine for hu-

man influenza should work in treating bird flu. However, influenza viruses can become resistant to these drugs, so these medications may not always work. Also note that seasonal influenza vaccines do not protect against avian influenza infection. While there is a vaccine available for bird flu, it is

not available on the market (though commercial vaccines for other strains are being worked on). Instead, public health officials have a stockpile in the event of an outbreak. Learn more at: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/gen-info/qa.htm>

HIGHLIGHTS

The Miami-Dade County Health Department's Public Health Preparedness Program is devoted to keeping the community ready for a variety of public health emergencies, including flu epidemics. For more information, call the main number at 305-470-6928 or email at MD-CHD_PHP@doh.state.fl.us

The Disease Control and Epidemiology Program does constant county-wide surveillance for infectious illnesses, including investigations of possible outbreaks. For more information, call 305-470-5660

For more health topics, visit www.dadehealth.org/atoz/atoz.asp