

## Avian Influenza

### **What is avian influenza (bird flu)?**

Avian influenza is caused by a virus that exists naturally in wild birds. Wild birds usually do not become sick, but they carry the virus and can pass it on to non-wild birds, such as chickens, turkeys, and ducks (fowl), which can become very sick and die.

### **How is the disease spread?**

Certain water birds act as hosts to influenza viruses by carrying the virus in their intestines and shedding it in bodily fluids, such as saliva, nasal secretions, and feces. Other birds are infected when they come in contact with these fluids. Humans can become infected through contact with infected poultry or these contaminated fluids.

### **Do bird flu viruses infect people?**

Bird flu viruses do not generally infect people, but there have been several instances of human infection from bird flu viruses since the first reported case in 1997. There are many different types, and only a few of them can make people sick, including the H5N1 strain recently seen in Asia.

### **What are the symptoms of avian influenza in people?**

The reported symptoms of avian influenza in humans have ranged from typical influenza-like symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches) to eye infections, pneumonia, acute respiratory distress, viral pneumonia, and other severe and life-threatening complications. The symptoms

may depend on which virus caused the infection.

### **Is there a test for avian influenza?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has the capability to test for many avian influenza viruses.

### **What is done to stop an infection among birds once it happens?**

All infected birds and those in the same flocks with them should be killed. People who work with infected chickens, and other fowl should be vaccinated against human influenza. The transportation of chickens, turkeys, and ducks and their export should be stopped in the affected regions. Disinfectant also kills the virus and should be used in contaminated areas such as chicken pens.

### **Is it safe to eat chicken or turkey?**

Yes. General precautions should always be taken when handling any raw meat, including fowl, to avoid possibly spreading germs. These measures include washing hands and surfaces before and after food preparation; avoiding using the same utensils on raw meat as on other foods, even cooked meat; and cooking raw meat thoroughly. The same steps should be taken when handling raw eggs too.

### **How is bird flu in humans treated?**

An avian influenza vaccine is being developed and tested for use in humans. Some studies have shown that antiviral prescription medications approved for human influenza

strains may have some effect on avian influenza.

### **What is the current status of the bird flu epidemic?**

Outbreaks of avian influenza (type H5N1) occurred among poultry in eight countries in Asia during late 2003 and early 2004. At that time, millions of birds in the infected countries were killed to try to control the outbreak. The outbreak began again in late June 2004 and is still ongoing. There have also been reported human cases and some deaths in several countries in Asia.

### **What is the risk in the U.S. to people from the H5N1 virus in Asia?**

The H5N1 virus does not usually infect humans. There have been some cases of people becoming sick in Asia, but because all influenza viruses have the ability to change, scientists are concerned that the H5N1 virus could one day be able to easily infect people and spread from person to person. If this happens and the influenza spreads around the world it would be called a pandemic.

### **What should I be doing?**

There are several things people can do as precautionary measures, including:

- Practice good hygiene, especially frequent hand washing, covering your mouth when you cough or sneeze, and then washing your hands again
- The CDC advises that if you are planning to travel to countries in Asia with known outbreaks of H5N1 influenza, avoid poultry farms, contact with animals in live food markets, and any surfaces that appear to be contaminated with feces from poultry or other animals
- Listen to the news and stay informed if there is an outbreak

- If you are sick, stay home from work or school; consult your health care provider if symptoms persist or are severe.

For specific concerns or questions about avian influenza, call the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Communicable Disease Control Section at 603-271-4496 or 800-852-3345 x4496. For further information, refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov), the World Health Organization website at [www.who.int](http://www.who.int), or the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services website at [www.dhhs.nh.gov](http://www.dhhs.nh.gov).