

Avian Influenza (Bird Flu) Outbreak

An outbreak of avian influenza, more commonly known as bird flu, is affecting bird populations in countries throughout Asia. The outbreak is caused by the H5N1 subtype of Influenza A. Human cases have also been reported.

- **In birds:** Outbreaks of avian influenza A (H5Na) have been confirmed among birds in a number of Asian cultures.

Visit the World Organization for Animal Health website at <http://www.oie.int> for more information.

- **In people:** The outbreak of bird flu has resulted in human cases of H5N1 infection. The death rate among confirmed human cases is very high, 75-80%. At this time it is believed that these cases resulted from contact with infected birds or surfaces contaminated with poop from infected birds. An investigation is ongoing to find the source of human infections.

Visit the World Health Organization (WHO) website at <http://www.who.int/en/> for more information.

Information on Influenza A (H5N1)

- **Background:** Influenza A (H5N1) is a subtype of the Type A influenza virus. Wild birds are the natural hosts of the virus, hence the name avian influenza or bird flu. The virus is passed from bird to bird worldwide. Birds can easily catch the virus, and it can be deadly, especially for farm birds like chickens.
- **Infection:** The virus does not usually infect humans. In 1997, however, the first case of direct bird-to-human spread of H5N1 was noted during an outbreak of avian influenza among birds in Hong Kong; the virus caused severe respiratory illness in 18 people, 6 of whom died. Since that time, there have been other instances of H5N1 infection among humans. H5N1 virus has recently been found to spread from human to human. This is being watched carefully and investigated during this outbreak.
- **Spread:** Infected birds shed virus in spit, nasal discharge, and poop. Avian influenza viruses spread among birds at risk when they have contact with any infected waste that comes out of the body. It is believed that most cases of H5N1 infection in humans have resulted from touching birds that have the virus or surfaces that were touched by birds with the virus.

Containment

Key to containing the outbreak is the killing of sick and exposed birds. This was done to contain the 1997 H5N1 outbreak in Hong Kong. Many experts believe this was important in order to stop many more human cases. For the current outbreak in Asia, governments are killing birds to try to stop the virus. Patients are being treated and separated from others, and investigations are underway to find the source of the infection.

It is very important to practice clean habits when handling any birds or eggs. This means hand washing with antibacterial soap and hot water for at least 30 seconds before and after handling food, and also wiping down surfaces with a bleaching agent.

Since cooking kills the virus, it is essential to cook any poultry or eggs so that the inside temperature of the food reaches 165° F.

What Will Happen

All influenza viruses can change. It is possible that an avian influenza virus could change so that it could infect humans and could spread easily from person to person. Because these viruses commonly do not infect humans, there is little or no immune protection against them in the human population. If an avian influenza virus were able to infect people and gain the ability to spread easily from person to person, an “influenza pandemic” could begin.

Recommendations

Travelers: No travel advisories, but the US and other countries advise travelers to countries in Asia with known H5N1 outbreaks should avoid poultry farms, contact with animals in live food markets, and any surfaces that appear to be contaminated with poop from birds or other animals.