

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT “BIRD FLU”

What is it?

Bird flu is an infection caused by avian (bird) influenza (flu) viruses. These viruses occur naturally among birds. Wild birds carry the viruses in their intestines, but usually do not get sick from them. However, avian influenza is very contagious among birds and can make some domesticated birds, including chickens, ducks, and turkeys, very sick and even kill them.

Infected birds shed influenza virus in their saliva, nasal secretions, and feces. Susceptible birds become infected when they have direct contact with contaminated body fluids or surfaces that have been contaminated with body fluids from infected birds. Domesticated birds may become infected with avian influenza virus through direct contact with infected birds, or through contact with surfaces (such as dirt or cages) or materials (such as water or feed) that have been contaminated with the virus.

Human infection with avian influenza viruses

Avian and many types of human flu are caused by Type A influenza viruses. There are many different subtypes of type A influenza viruses. All known subtypes of influenza A viruses can be found in birds.

Usually avian influenza virus refers to influenza A viruses found mainly in birds, but infections with these viruses can occur in humans. The most common virus to infect birds is H5N1. While the risk is low, confirmed cases of human infection from several subtypes of avian influenza infection have been reported since 1997. Most cases of avian influenza infection in humans have resulted from contact with infected poultry or surfaces contaminated with secretion/excretions from infected birds. The spread of avian influenza viruses from one ill person to another has been reported very rarely, and transmission has not been observed to continue beyond one person.

Symptoms of avian influenza in humans have ranged from typical human influenza-like symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches) to eye infections, pneumonia, severe respiratory diseases (such as acute respiratory distress), and other severe and life-threatening complications. The symptoms of avian influenza may depend on which virus caused the infection.

Human risks during an outbreak

Of the few avian influenza viruses that infected humans, H5N1 has caused the largest number of cases of severe disease and death in humans. Most cases have occurred in previously healthy children and young adults and 50% of those infected have died. So far, the spread of H5N1 virus from person to person has been limited and has not continued beyond one person.

Treatment and vaccination for H5N1 virus in humans

The H5N1 virus that has caused human illness and death in Asia is resistant to amantadine and rimantadine, two antiviral medications commonly used for influenza. Two other antiviral medications, oseltamavir (Tamiflu) and zanamavir (Relenza), would probably work to treat influenza caused by H5N1 virus, but additional studies still need to be done to demonstrate their effectiveness.

There currently is no commercially available vaccine to protect humans against the H5N1 virus that is being seen in Asia and Europe. However, vaccine development efforts are taking place. **The Medical Management Committee of the Sanford Health Plan has already approved widespread vaccination of the Plan's members as soon as an approved vaccine is available.** We will follow all Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines if and when Avian Flu becomes a problem in this country.

This material has been adapted from the CDC website. For further information please access www.cdc.gov or www.birdflu.gov.