

Frequently Asked Questions about Avian Influenza

What is avian influenza or bird flu?

Avian influenza, also called bird flu, is different from seasonal flu. Bird flu is caused by a virus that occurs naturally in wild birds.

There are several different types of avian influenza viruses. An avian virus type known as H5N1 has recently infected domestic poultry flocks in Asia, Africa and Europe. In response, officials have killed millions of birds to control the spread of disease.

How does bird flu spread?

Bird flu is spread when infected birds shed the virus in their saliva, nasal secretions and droppings.

Wild birds usually don't get sick from the virus, but they can pass it on to domestic birds like chickens, turkeys and ducks, which can get very sick and die.

Can bird flu spread from person to person?

Scientists believe it may be possible for people to transmit bird flu person to person, but there is no definite proof.

Has bird flu been found in the U.S.?

There are several different types of avian influenza viruses.

Outbreaks of avian influenza have occurred on poultry farms in Canada and the U.S., but the H5N1 virus was not identified in these outbreaks.

In 2004, a strain of avian virus – not H5N1 – was reported in birds in New Jersey and Delaware. The strain identified in this outbreak is not considered a threat to human health, but poultry farmers in New Jersey cleaned and disinfected their facilities. Thousands of chickens were killed in Delaware.

Have people become infected with bird flu? Has anyone died?

The first case of human infection with bird flu was reported in 1997 in Hong Kong. Since then, several hundred human cases have been reported in Asia and Africa. Deaths occurred among more than half of people whose cases were confirmed in the laboratory.

Public health officials believe people were infected with bird flu after they had contact with the bodily fluids of infected birds, or surfaces contaminated with these fluids.

To date there have been no human cases of bird flu reported in the U.S.

What are the symptoms of bird flu in humans?

Bird flu can cause typical flu-like symptoms such as fever, cough, sore throat and muscle aches. Symptoms may also include eye infection, pneumonia and severe breathing problems, possibly leading to death. Up to 10 days may pass between being exposed to the virus and developing these symptoms.



Is there a test to confirm bird flu in humans?

Healthcare providers can perform a test for seasonal influenza. If this test is positive, other testing can be done to determine if the influenza is bird flu.

What type of treatment is provided for people who become infected with bird flu?

People who are infected with bird flu can become very sick. Treatment may include hospitalization, supportive care and/or the use of drugs known as antivirals. In order for antivirals to be effective they must be started within 48 hours of symptom onset. Antibiotics are not effective against bird flu.

Is there a vaccine to protect against bird flu?

There is no approved vaccine to prevent bird flu, but scientists are at work to develop one.

Is it safe to eat chicken and turkey?

It is safe to eat chicken, turkey and eggs as long as they have been thoroughly cooked.

How can I reduce the risk of becoming infected with bird flu?

If you plan to travel to countries with known outbreaks of bird flu, avoid poultry farms, contact with live animals in live food markets and any surfaces contaminated with bird or animal droppings. Before you travel abroad, check the CDC website (www.cdc.gov), or call their hotline at 1-888-246-2675 for the latest travel advice.

Why is bird flu causing so much concern?

Humans have little or no natural protection against bird flu viruses. Public health officials are concerned that the current bird flu virus could change into a form that spreads easily between humans. We don't know if or when that might happen. If it does, a worldwide outbreak, or pandemic, could occur. Many people could get sick and die, depending on the severity of the pandemic.

A severe flu pandemic could have a serious impact on society. So many people would be sick that hospitals and healthcare providers would have a difficult time treating everyone. Everyday life could be disrupted as people try to avoid contact with other people. Businesses could suffer as greater numbers of people become sick.

What are public health officials doing about bird flu?

If bird flu evolved into a pandemic, every country in the world could be affected. International experts at the World Health Organization are working together to carefully watch for bird flu outbreaks in birds and humans. Increasingly, nations are sharing information on disease outbreaks, collaborating on methods to control the spread of infection, and preparing for the possibility of a pandemic.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is working with national and international partners to control further outbreaks of avian influenza and to prepare for the possibility of an influenza pandemic. CDC is preparing for a pandemic and assisting state governments with their pandemic planning efforts. For more information visit www.pandemicflu.gov.

The New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) has been preparing for an influenza pandemic for years. The DHSS Influenza Pandemic Plan, developed in 2001, is constantly being reviewed and updated. The plan has been shared with New Jersey public health partners, including local health departments and hospitals.