

Avian Flu fact sheet

Information kindly supplied by:

www.askted.com.au (Search Avian Bird Flu) HBF (Dr Duncan Jefferson)

www.mydr.com.au/default.asp?article=4163

(Use these links and others as listed in the unit *Avian Flu: Be Prepared* to ensure that you have the most up-to-date information.)

Avian Flu — what is the risk?

- Avian bird flu is just as the title suggests: a flu virus that afflicts domestic fowl (in this case a strain of the influenza A virus). Avian Bird Flu mostly affects birds but it can also affect humans, as well as animals such as cats and pigs.
- The bird flu virus that since 2003 has spread across Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa is known as H5N1 and was first detected in 1997 in chickens in Hong Kong. More than 200 million birds have died or been slaughtered worldwide to try and control the bird flu epidemic. The H5N1 bird flu virus is not present in Australia.
- The natural pool of the virus is found in wild birds, which are not usually affected by the virus. They can, however, transmit the virus to domesticated birds such as chickens and turkeys. These birds can be killed by the infection and will shed the virus in their feathers, mucous, saliva and faeces.

How is it spread? Can the virus get transmitted to humans?

- Bird flu is highly contagious, and can infect all types of birds. Wild birds, especially water birds such as ducks, are the natural hosts of the virus. They often have no symptoms or only mild disease, but can pass the infection to domesticated birds who can develop severe disease. The disease can be passed between birds by direct contact, or carried between farms by contaminated objects, such as cages, clothing or feed.
- Human infections with bird flu are not common, but it is possible for people to catch bird flu from infected poultry or surfaces contaminated with droppings, saliva or feathers from infected birds. Human cases of bird flu generally coincide with outbreaks in poultry.
- There have only been a small number of human cases of bird flu being spread from one human to another, but the disease has not continued beyond one person.
- While the virus can also survive in raw poultry meat, it is important to note that Australia does not allow the importation of live chickens, raw poultry or eggs.

What are the symptoms?

- In most people, the initial symptoms of Avian Flu are similar to the symptoms that you experience when you have the regular form of the flu — fever, muscle aches and pains and a cough. The symptoms generally appear within five days of being infected with the virus. Those people who are infected with aggressive, or virulent, sub-types of the virus (such as H5N1) may develop complications such as pneumonia. Another serious complication is a condition known as acute respiratory distress syndrome, which causes life-threatening breathing problems due to the lungs filling with fluid, rather than air.

Why is there such concern about 'Bird Flu'?

- While there is no evidence to suggest the current strain of bird flu can be spread from human to human, the mortality rate in affected humans can be as high as 70%. Scientists are concerned that the bird flu virus may gain the ability to spread from one human to the next with the contagiousness of human influenza - the world would then be facing an influenza pandemic. Potentially, tens of millions of people could die as a result. This catastrophic situation cannot be taken lightly.

Can we develop a vaccine if needed?

- Hopefully yes, but it is a race against the clock. It takes time to identify new viruses and to establish a manufacturing process to produce enough of the stuff. Then the effectiveness and safety of the vaccine needs to be tested, before it can be distributed for use around the world —a massive undertaking.

What is the worst case scenario?

- If the Avian Flu virus were to spread and our immune systems were unable to respond and repel the virus (without a vaccine), then no-one will be immune and no-one will be safe. This happened in the 1920s when up to 50 million people worldwide were killed by the 'Spanish Flu'.

What is being done to prevent bird flu entering Australia?

The government has implemented measures to prevent bird flu entering Australia, including:

- banning the import of live poultry or uncooked poultry products (including eggs)
- improving surveillance at all ports of entry into Australia
- increasing sampling of domestic flocks of birds for evidence of disease.

(Reference: Avian Influenza Hotline, Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry, Ph: 1800 675 888)

Is there anything I can do to help?

Despite the potentially deadly impact these viruses can have, we can help ourselves by:

- maintaining a good level of health and fitness
- improving personal hygiene by frequent, effective hand-washing
- covering your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing
- buying some face masks and wearing them if you have a cold or a flu (the Japanese have been doing this for decades) in order to limit 'droplet' spread
- carrying alcohol wipes with you when you are out, so that after you have handled different items, you can wipe your hands and clean off any unwanted 'guests'!
- being aware of others who may be coughing or sneezing and avoiding them. This will reduce your chances of picking up their invisible droplets
- by calling your doctor and informing them you suspect you have an infection. If you attend the surgery you may be asked to wear a mask and sit in an 'isolation' area until you have been seen.

All these precautions can have a massive effect on reducing the impact of a potentially devastating epidemic.

How can I avoid catching bird flu while travelling?

If you are travelling overseas, especially in Asia, take the following steps to protect yourself:

- avoid domesticated birds, poultry farms and live bird markets
- regularly wash your hands or use alcohol-based hand sanitisers
- wash your hands thoroughly after handling any uncooked poultry meat or eggs
- avoid eating any foods that contain raw or undercooked eggs
- make sure any chicken you eat is thoroughly cooked.

It may also be a good idea to have a flu shot before you leave. Although a flu shot won't protect you from bird flu, it can prevent infection with human flu viruses that are circulating.

If you do become unwell or experience any flu-like symptoms on your return to Australia, you should see your doctor. Make sure you tell your doctor that you have been travelling, and which areas you visited. Your doctor also needs to know if you visited any open-air markets or farms.