

What is avian influenza?

Avian influenza is an infection caused by avian (bird) flu viruses. Bird flu viruses occur naturally among birds. Avian flu is commonly referred to as "H5N1 virus."

How common is it?

Wild birds worldwide carry the avian flu viruses in their intestines, but usually do not get sick from them. However, avian flu is very contagious among birds and can make some domesticated birds and mammals, including chickens, ducks, and turkeys, and cows very sick and even cause death.

What about the 2024 outbreak in dairy cows?

On March 25, 2024, the CDC reported a multi-state outbreak of H5N1 bird flu in dairy cows, marking the first instance of these viruses being found in cattle in the United States. Although rare, mammals can contract H5N1 bird flu from infected birds or contaminated environments, posing a small risk of transmission to humans. The CDC has confirmed 4 human infections in three states linked to exposure to infected dairy cows.

While the current public health risk is low, CDC is watching the situation carefully and working with states to monitor people with exposure to infected animals.

How do people become infected?

Bird flu viruses do not normally infect humans, but sporadic human infections with bird flu viruses have occurred. It is spread by infected birds that shed flu virus in their saliva, nasal secretions, and feces (poop). Birds become infected when they have contact with contaminated fluids or surfaces that are contaminated. Human infections occur through direct contact with infected birds or surfaces and objects contaminated by bird feces. Most human cases occur in rural areas where many people keep small poultry (chickens or turkeys) flocks, which often roam freely.

What are the signs and symptoms in people?

The reported symptoms in humans have ranged from no symptoms or mild illness such as eye redness or flu-like upper respiratory symptoms to severe symptoms such as pneumonia. Symptoms can include fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, body aches, headaches, fatigue, and shortness of breath or difficulty breathing.

Who is at risk for avian influenza?

Those who work closely with poultry, wild birds, or contaminated materials or surfaces such as farmers, poultry workers, and bird handlers. Additionally, individuals who live in areas where outbreaks have occurred or who consume undercooked poultry products are also at increased risk.

How is avian influenza in humans treated?

The CDC recommends antiviral treatment for people with suspected or confirmed avian influenza infection, especially for severe cases. This is the same antiviral treatment used for seasonal influenza.

Is there a test for avian influenza?

There are tests available to test for avian influenza. Avian flu virus is usually diagnosed by collecting a swab from the upper respiratory tract (nose or throat) of the sick person. Testing is more accurate when the swab is collected during the first few days of illness.

How can you prevent avian influenza?

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

- Avoiding contact with sick or dead birds
- Cooking poultry products thoroughly to kill the virus
- Practicing good hygiene, such as washing hands frequently with soap and water, especially after handling poultry or touching surfaces that may have been contaminated
- 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

A vaccine against avian influenza is in development, but is not currently available. The current influenza vaccines will not protect humans against avian flu.

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