

This fact sheet provides a basic description of avian influenza, describes the implications of the current situation, lists the symptoms, and provides guidelines for prevention. This fact sheet includes information from International SOS, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

What is avian influenza?

Avian influenza, sometimes called bird flu, chicken flu, or H5N1 flu virus, is a term used to describe strains of influenza (flu) that can infect domestic poultry flocks and wild birds. The virus is contained in the secretions or excretions of an infected animal, especially the feces. The disease spreads easily from bird to bird. Other species such as cats, pigs, and even humans can be infected with avian flu. It is believed that infected domestic and migratory water fowl are spreading the avian flu virus from location to location.

Avian influenza H5N1 outbreak

The first reported case of human H5N1 infection occurred in Hong Kong in 1997. H5N1 continues to infect young, previously healthy people and has a high death rate. Humans appear to become infected by touching or ingesting infected meat or by touching, then ingesting or inhaling, infected poultry feces.

Some cases cannot be traced to infected poultry. It is believed that some of those infected may have had contact with ducks that carry the virus. Ducks can shed H5N1 without showing any symptoms of the illness. There has been at least one case of probable human-to-human transmission.

Potential for a worldwide epidemic (pandemic)

Authorities are concerned that the H5N1 virus could undergo genetic changes or pick up genes from other influenza viruses. A change in its makeup could enable H5N1 to spread easily from human to human. Since humans have little or no immunity to this flu virus, a widespread or worldwide epidemic (pandemic) could occur. Such a pandemic could have an extremely high death toll.

Clinical features and symptoms of avian influenza

- Patients usually, but not always, have been in contact with infected birds
- Most cases occur in previously healthy children and young adults
- The incubation period is 3 days (range 2–7 days)
- Fever greater than 99.5°F (37.5°C)
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Sore muscles
- Shortness of breath
- Diarrhea

Preventing the spread of avian influenza

- Always maintain high levels of personal hygiene. Frequent hand washing is very important.
- Receive a seasonal influenza vaccination (flu shot). This shot is for protection against the seasonal flu strain, not avian flu.

- Avoid live animal markets and poultry and pig farms in affected countries.
- Do not handle sick or dead birds or swim in any body of water that is used by birds.
- Avoid touching surfaces that may be contaminated by poultry or duck droppings.
- Wash hands before and after food preparation.
- The influenza virus is destroyed by heat. Poultry and poultry products that will be consumed, including eggs, must be thoroughly cooked. The inner temperature of meat must reach 158°F (70°C). Wash eggs before using them in cooking, and then wash your hands after handling eggs. Never consume raw poultry products. The virus has also been detected in processed, frozen duck meat. Thoroughly cook any pork products before consuming.
- If you suspect you are infected, seek medical treatment immediately.
- Do the following to increase your level of hygiene:
 - Wash your hands. Hand washing is the single most important and effective component for preventing the transmission of infection. Wash your hands frequently, whether you are sick or healthy, and encourage others to do the same.
 - Use an alcohol-based hand rub when clean water and soap are not available.
 - Avoid people who are coughing and sneezing.
 - Minimize the risk of passing the virus on by covering your mouth when coughing or sneezing. Use a mask, or cover your nose and mouth with your upper forearm or a tissue and then dispose of the tissue.
 - Refrain from touching your own mouth, nose, and eyes.
 - Refrain from touching potentially contaminated surfaces.
 - Frequently clean surfaces that may have become contaminated with the virus, such as doorknobs, phones, or flat surfaces. Regular household cleaning products that contain bleach will kill the flu virus on surfaces.
 - Avoid crowds.
 - Postpone travel if you become infected, until you have recovered.

For the more information regarding avian influenza, visit the World Health Organization's (WHO) Web site www.who.int.