

Introduction to Avian Influenza

The following PDF provides information on symptoms, and causes of avian influenza, as well as risk factors and how to best prevent catching avian flu.

Introduction

Usually, “avian influenza virus” refers to influenza A viruses found chiefly in birds, but infections with these viruses can occur in humans. The risk from avian influenza is generally low to most people, because the viruses do not usually infect humans. However, confirmed cases of human infection from several subtypes of avian influenza infection have been reported since 1997.

Symptoms

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.

Causes

Avian influenza is an infection caused by avian (bird) influenza (flu) viruses. These influenza viruses occur naturally among birds. Wild birds worldwide 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 kill them. Contact with infected fecal material is the most common of bird-to-bird transmission.

Risks

The risk of a pandemic human influenza strain emerging from co infection of a human influenza carrier by avian influenza H5N1 virus is small; however, the potential global public health impact could be catastrophic.

Prevention

So far, spread of H5N1 virus from person to person has been rare, limited and unsustainable. Nonetheless, because all influenza viruses have the ability to change, scientists are concerned that H5N1 virus one day could be able to infect humans and spread easily from one person to another. Because these viruses do not commonly infect humans, there is little or no immune protection against them in the human population.

Four different influenza antiviral drugs (amantadine, rimantadine, oseltamivir, and zanamivir) are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment and prevention of influenza. All four have activity against influenza A viruses. However, sometimes influenza strains can become resistant to these drugs, and therefore the drugs may not always be effective.

Most cases of avian influenza infection in humans have resulted from direct or close contact with infected poultry or surfaces contaminated with secretions and excretions from infected birds. Even if poultry and eggs were to be contaminated with the virus, proper cooking would kill it.

To stay safe, the advice is the same for protecting against any infection from poultry:

- Wash your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds before and after handling raw poultry and eggs.
- Clean cutting boards and other utensils with soap and hot water to keep raw poultry from contaminating other foods.
- Use a food thermometer to make sure you cook poultry to a temperature of at least 165 degrees Fahrenheit. Consumers may wish to cook poultry to a higher temperature for personal preference.
- Cook eggs until whites and yolks are firm.