

Q&A on Avian Influenza (Bird Flu)

ABOUT THE ILLNESS

Q: What is Avian Influenza?

A: Avian influenza, also known as bird flu or avian flu, is an influenza virus that affects and causes disease in birds. There are 2 main kinds of influenza viruses – A & B. Influenza A viruses are found in many different animals, including ducks, chickens, geese, pigs, wild birds, whales, horses, and seals. Influenza B viruses circulate widely only among humans. Wild birds are the primary natural reservoir for all subtypes of influenza A viruses and are thought to be the source of influenza A viruses in all other animals.

ABOUT THE CAUSE

Q: What causes bird flu?

A: Bird flu is caused by influenza viruses that usually affect only birds. Many types of birds carry this disease including chicken, geese, ducks, turkey, and wild birds e.g. migratory ducks.

Q: What are the symptoms of bird flu in humans?

A: Fever, cough, sore throat, muscle aches and severe breathing difficulty. Basically the symptoms of bird flu in humans are very similar to that of human flu, except that it is more likely to lead to the development of serious conditions such as viral pneumonia.

Q: I have birds as pets at home. What are the symptoms of bird flu in birds?

A: Loss of appetite, ruffled feathers, fever, weakness, diarrhoea, excessive thirst, and swelling. Depending how strong the virus is, between half or all the birds infected may die.

Q: Does bird flu infect humans?

A: While it is unusual for people to get influenza infections directly from animals, occasionally human infections and outbreaks caused by certain bird influenza viruses have been reported. Bird flu was initially thought to infect birds only, but it was found in humans for the first time in May 1997 in Hong Kong. Bird flu also affects pigs.

Q: How many types of bird flu affect humans?

A: Only 2 types of bird flu have ever been found to infect humans. These are 2 subtypes of the influenza A virus known as H5N1 and H9N2.

Q: Have outbreaks of bird flu occurred in the past?

A: In May 1997, the virus infected 18 persons and caused 6 deaths. That was the first time the virus was known to jump from birds to humans. The immediate culling of around 1.5 million chickens in Hong

Kong is thought to have prevented a bigger outbreak. In 1999, 2 mild cases of avian influenza A (H9N2) occurred in Hong Kong. In February 2003, 2 human cases of influenza A (H5N1) infection were confirmed in a single family of Hong Kong residents who had recently travelled to Fujian province on Mainland China. Both patients were hospitalised and one died. In early 2004, fatalities of human cases of bird flu have been reported in Thailand and Vietnam.

Q: What are the countries affected by bird flu?

A: So far, cases of bird flu, mostly in chickens and ducks, have been reported in Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Laos, China and USA.

Q: Any travel advice for countries affected by bird flu?

A: The World Health Organisation does not at present recommend any restrictions on travel to any country currently experiencing outbreaks of H5N1 avian infection in poultry flocks, including countries that have also reported cases in humans. At this time, WHO recommends that travellers to areas experiencing outbreaks of H5N1 avian infection should avoid contact with live animal markets and poultry farms. Large amounts of the virus are known to be excreted in the droppings from infected birds.

ABOUT TREATMENT

Q: How is bird flu in humans diagnosed?

A: Rapid testing for influenza testing is done by the collection of samples from inside the nose or the back of the throat. Blood testing can also be done. However, as these tests are rather specialised, your GP may not be able to perform these tests at their clinics and the tests may have to be done in a government clinic or hospital.

Q: What is the treatment for bird flu?

A: At present, doctors are treating bird flu in the same way that normal human flu is treated. If you should see your doctor for flu treatment, please inform your doctor if you have been in contact with birds or poultry or if you have travelled to a country with known cases of bird flu. Medication for the treatment of flu includes amantadine, rimantadine, zanamivir and oseltamivir.

ABOUT THE SPREAD

Q: How is bird flu spread?

A: Infected birds spread the virus through saliva, faeces, and nasal secretions.

Q: How long is the incubation period for bird flu in humans?

A: At present, there is no specific information on the incubation period for bird flu. With regards to normal human flu, the time from when a person is exposed to flu virus to when symptoms begin is about 1-4

days, with an average of about 2 days.

Q: Does bird flu get transmitted between humans?

A: At present, there is no evidence that human-to-human transmission is occurring. Generally bird flu viruses contain bird genes. If the viruses get transmitted to a human and acquire human genes, then the likelihood for human-to-human transmission is greater. Because pigs are susceptible to both bird flu as well as human flu, it is theoretically possible that pigs may become a “mixing vessel” and produce a new kind of bird flu that is transmissible between humans.

Q: Will I catch bird flu if I eat chicken or eggs?

A: There is no evidence that the bird flu virus is being passed through eating chicken products. If you prepare chicken, do not buy live chickens, and only buy chickens where their intestines are removed. Freezing does not kill the virus; so even if you are preparing frozen chicken, ensure that the chicken is cooked properly. Heat kills viruses and the World Health Organisation says that chicken products should be cooked thoroughly at temperatures of at least 70 degrees Celsius. People should wash their hands after handling poultry and ensure that poultry carcasses do not contaminate other objects.

ABOUT PREVENTION

Q: Is there a way to prevent infection?

A: At present, bird flu is not thought to be spread from human to human. However, you might find the following suggested ways to prevent catching the flu virus from another person useful:

- I Maintain good personal and environmental hygiene.
- I Keep hands clean and wash hands properly.
- I Wash your hands when there are respiratory secretions on them, e.g. after sneezing.
- I Cover your nose and mouth while sneezing or coughing and dispose of nasal and mouth discharge properly. Do not spit.
- I Good body resistance helps to prevent influenza infection. This can be achieved through a balanced diet, regular exercise, adequate rest, reduce stress and avoid smoking.
- I During the “flu season”, it is better to avoid crowded public places where the ventilation is not good.
- I By far the best way to prevent the flu is for individuals, especially persons at high risk for serious complications from the flu, to get a flu shot each year.

ABOUT VACCINATION

Q: Is there a vaccine against bird flu?

A: At present, there is no known vaccination specifically against bird flu. As a precaution, human flu vaccinations are recommended for all health workers.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Q: Where do I get further information on influenza?

A: For further information, you may refer to the following:

- I Hong Kong Department of Health website: <http://www.info.gov.hk/dh>
- I World Health Organization (WHO) website: <http://www.who.int/en/>
- I Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): <http://www.cdc.gov/>

For further information regarding the influenza virus including information on the spread, treatment, prevention and vaccinations, please refer to the Q&A on influenza. Because bird flu is essentially caused by influenza viruses, the information regarding the treatment and prevention is believed to be the same as that for influenza.

Sources from: Quality HealthCare