More Information

About Avian Influenza:

U.S. Department of Agriculture:
www.usda.gov/birdflu

World Health Organization:
www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
www.cdc.gov/flu/avian

About Pandemic Influenza:

U.S. government:
www.pandemicflu.gov

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: http://www.hhs.gov/pandemicflu

Other Information:

Partnership for Food Safety Education:
www.fightbac.org

Consumer Federation of America:
www.consumerfed.org

Consumer Federation of America

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Washington, DC 20006
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A CONSUMER GUIDE TO AVIAN INFLUENZA

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What Is Bird Flu?

Over the past year, numerous news reports have warned of the possibility of an outbreak of avian influenza, or "bird flu," and the threat of serious human illness. It is important for consumers to know that these reports are often talking about two separate diseases: avian influenza, a disease that kills birds; and pandemic influenza, which spreads among humans.

Bad News for Birds

Avian influenza (AI) is a virus that causes respiratory infections in both wild and domestic birds, including poultry. It is mainly spread among birds via saliva, nasal fluid and feces.

AI virus types are typically grouped into two categories, based on the ability to cause illness: *low pathogenic avian influenza* (LPAI), which often does not even make infected birds sick; and *high pathogenic avian influenza* (HPAI), which causes the most serious outbreaks in birds. An HPAI strain may kill 90 to 100 percent of birds in a flock in a very short time.

One specific HPAI virus strain, called H5N1, has sickened and killed thousands of birds in 57 countries, but not in the United States. It has also caused substantial economic loss to the people who raise poultry in the affected countries. In some places, humans who work closely with live birds have contracted respiratory illness traced to the bird flu virus. The virus has rarely spread from one person to another and then only among family members or others in close contact with infected birds.

A Potential Human Disease

There is a risk that the virus that causes avian influenza could change form or mutate, allowing it to pass from one human to another in much the same way that the seasonal influenza viruses we experience each year do. Such a mutation has not yet occurred.

If the virus acquires the ability to spread efficiently among humans, it will be a new human disease, not avian influenza. Most reports have referred to this as "pandemic influenza," as it would spread around the globe via human-to-human contact. Infection will be spread among humans in much the same way as common seasonal influenza, through contact with sputum from an infected person or by touching surfaces infected people have touched.

It is always important to practice good public health self-defense. Avoid spray from people who are coughing or sneezing. Avoid putting your hands in your mouth or eyes. Wash your hands frequently with warm soap and water throughout the day.

Government Protections

The U.S. government is taking several steps to ensure that HPAI H5N1 avian influenza does not enter domestic poultry flocks in the United States. The government is closely monitoring migratory wild bird populations for possible signs of disease. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has banned poultry from countries currently affected by HPAI. The Department of Health and Human Services is conducting research on vaccines to protect Americans in case the virus does mutate into a type able to spread between humans.

AI Poultry and You

For American consumers, the chances of contracting the avian influenza virus is minimal. First, most Americans do not come into contact with live wild birds or poultry. Second, there is little chance that infected chickens would get to market. Poultry producers are monitoring their flocks continuously for signs of disease. In addition, government inspectors are onsite in every poultry slaughterhouse and are charged with ensuring that companies identify and destroy infected birds. Third, on the small chance that the AI virus should defy the odds and be present in raw poultry, the most common sense steps of food safety self-defense will protect consumers against illness.

The four steps of safe food handling are:

CLEAN: Wash hands and surfaces often;

SEPARATE: Keep raw poultry products separate from other foods;

COOK: Cook poultry to 165 degrees Fahrenheit. Use a food thermometer to make sure the poultry reaches the safe internal temperature; and

CHILL: Refrigerate any leftover food promptly.