Fact Sheet

Avian Influenza ("Bird Flu")

General Public

What is Avian or Bird Flu?
Avian influenza is currently making many different types of birds in Asia sick. There are several different types of avian influenza and most types are found in birds. Avian influenza is often found in birds and is not easily spread from birds to people. The type found in birds in Asia right now has spread to a few people, but has not spread from person to person. There is concern about this type of avian influenza because it is a type of influenza that has caused serious illness in people in the past. The influenza virus changes all the time so there is also worry if this type of avian influenza ever changed so that it could spread person to person, many people would become ill.

Why is there concern about Avian Influenza?
The strain of avian influenza causing concern in Asia is referred to as the H5N1 strain. It is a severe strain of influenza. Public health officials are worried about this strain because it has caused illness and death in many birds and a limited number of has spread to humans. This strain is also a new genetic in birds and if it continues to change and has never been seen before. If it ever spreads easily from person to person, it could cause disease all over the world.

Where is Avian influenza right now?
H5N1 avian influenza has been identified in Asia, specifically Thailand, Cambodia, Viet Nam and Indonesia. As of fall 2005 there have been over approximately 100 confirmed human cases due to the H5N1 strain and about 60 deaths. Every person who has become ill with avian influenza has had close contact with infected or ill birds, has visited a live animal market, or has consumed bird blood or meat that was not completely cooked.

Is there a vaccine for Avian Influenza?
Currently, there is not a vaccine for humans to protect against avian influenza. Many national governments are working with researchers and scientists on a vaccine that is safe and will protect people from the H5N1 strain of influenza.

Are there other treatments for avian influenza besides the vaccine?
Yes. Some antiviral medications can be used to treat humans infected with the H5N1 avian influenza strain. This medication must be started within 48 hours after the start of symptoms to work. Currently the federal government is increasing its stockpile of this medication however there is no guarantee that this medication will work if avian influenza changes so that it spreads from person to person.

Can avian influenza spread to humans? Can it spread to other animals?
Avian influenza strains do not typically spread easily from birds to humans. The H5N1 strain currently in Asia has the ability to infect humans when a person has close contact with infected or ill birds, visiting a live animal markets, or consuming bird blood or bird meat that is not completely cooked. The H5N1 strain has also infected cats and tigers in close direct contact with infected or ill birds or if they have been fed raw infected bird meat.

Most avian influenza strains are spread among birds, not other animals. Since all influenza strains have the ability to change avian influenza may infect other animals.

What is the Iowa Department of Public Health doing to prevent and/or prepare for pandemic and avian influenza?
Throughout every "flu season", usually in the fall and winter months, Iowa Dept. of Public Health (IDPH) tracks the different types of influenza that occur in people who visit their doctor, attend school, child care or live in a long term care facility. IDPH is also developing a pandemic influenza response plan.

For more information on influenza, pandemic influenza and avian influenza refer to our website at www.idph.state.ia.us/adper/flu.asp.

Is the Iowa Dept. of Public Health stockpiling vaccine for avian influenza?
IDPH is not stockpiling vaccine or antiviral medication for avian influenza for three reasons:

- First, the federal government has started to stockpile antiviral medication.
- Second, for a vaccine to provide protection, it must be specific against the new strain of influenza (the vaccine must "match" the strain causing human illness).
- Third, even though the federal government has started to stockpile antiviral medication, there is no guarantee this medication will be effective or prevent illness due to a new strain of influenza.

The best preparation and defense for a possible pandemic is the ability to detect and identify a new strain of influenza virus quickly, and then determine the best response measures to limit exposure and spread, and identify medication(s) to effectively treat the disease.

What is the difference between avian influenza and other types of influenza?
Avian influenza typically only infects different types of birds. In the past, humans have only been infected with strains of avian influenza and experienced very mild illness such as eye infections, and no human-to-human spread.

Other types of influenza, like the types covered by the influenza vaccine, infect people or animals or both.

Influenza is a widespread disease that causes illness in 5-20% of the people in the U.S. every year.

Who is at risk for getting avian influenza?
From past highly pathogenic avian influenza outbreaks, and during the current H5N1 outbreak in Asia, it has been repeatedly shown that only humans who have very close contact with ill or infected birds, visit or participate in live animal markets, or consume bird blood or bird meat that is not thoroughly cooked, are at risk of being exposed to or infected with avian influenza. Possible human-to-human spread has only been noted in one case during the current H5N1 outbreak in Asia. Persons who have traveled to Asia are not likely to be exposed or infected with avian influenza unless there is significant contact with birds that are ill or dying due to the H5N1 strain, or attended a live animal market for a significant amount of time.

Could avian influenza cause "the next pandemic"?
Avian influenza may or may not cause "the next pandemic". Scientific research has shown that the three pandemics that occurred during the 20th century (1918 Spanish Flu, 1957 Asian Flu, and 1968 Hong Kong Flu) were due to changes of avian and human influenza genes. Public health experts are concerned the H5N1 strain of avian influenza currently in Asia has the ability to change and possibly cause a pandemic.