

Avian Flu - H5N1

For Service members and their Families

Important facts

- Avian influenza, also called avian flu or bird flu, is caused by a group of influenza viruses found commonly in birds. Some bird flu viruses are called “highly pathogenic” because they cause severe disease or death in birds.
- **The highly pathogenic (or disease producing) H5N1 avian flu virus that has caused serious illness and death in a small number of people is not currently present in birds or people in the U.S.**
- The “low pathogenic” H5N1 avian flu virus is present in the U.S. and poses some risk to domestic poultry and wild birds, but does not affect people. All references to “H5N1 avian flu virus” below are to the highly pathogenic form of H5N1.
- The H5N1 virus does not pass easily from person to person. Most of those who have developed illness from this virus have had prolonged, close contact with infected poultry.
- Human vaccines against the H5N1 avian flu virus are under development.
- People infected with the H5N1 avian flu virus will probably have fever, cough and difficulty breathing. Only a health care provider can determine what type of flu virus you have.
- The H5N1 avian flu virus has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of millions of birds. However, in its current form, there is no evidence that it will cause a pandemic (global outbreak) in people.

What is avian flu?

Avian flu, or bird flu, is an infection caused by flu viruses that occur naturally in wild birds. These viruses spread quickly in birds; some may cause severe illness and even death in poultry, and occasionally in wild birds.

How is the H5N1 avian flu virus affecting the poultry and wild birds around the world?

Since 1997, hundreds of millions of wild birds and poultry have died of infection with H5N1 avian flu virus, or have been destroyed to control its spread. Preventive killing of poultry (“culling”) is used to try to stop the spread of these viruses. The H5N1 avian flu virus sickens or kills most of the birds that become infected, although some wild birds may carry the virus without becoming ill. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has taken steps to ensure that poultry in our food supply is safe. Both the Departments of Interior and Agriculture are conducting wild bird and domestic poultry surveillance to test for H5N1 bird

flu in the U.S., and to date, none has been found except for the “low pathogenic” variety, posing no risk to people. Refer to the World Health Organization website for current international information on the virus,

http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/.

All of the human cases of H5N1 avian flu have been overseas. If I live in the U.S., do I have to worry?

Because the H5N1 avian flu virus is not currently present in the U.S., it presents no immediate risk in this country. In those areas of the world where it is present, in its current form, it does not pass easily from person to person. However, in a small number of cases, the H5N1 avian flu virus may have spread from one ill person to another due to prolonged and close contact. This virus usually causes severe flu symptoms, including fever and breathing difficulties. However, in some people, particularly children, symptoms may not follow this pattern. More than half of the people affected by the H5N1 virus have died. If the H5N1 changes (“mutates”) and begins to pass easily from person to person, it could result in a pandemic potentially affecting millions of people. (See “Pandemic Flu” at:

http://deploymenthealth.fhp.osd.mil/products/dhsd/PandemicFlu_110705.pdf).

What can I do to protect myself from infection with the H5N1 avian flu virus?

Unless the H5N1 virus appears in this country or an area overseas where you are living or working, there are no specific precautions to take at this time. Whether or not there is currently a possibility of exposure to the H5N1 virus, it is always good practice not to handle any sick or dead birds or other animals. Pets and wild animals can carry a wide variety of diseases that may spread to people. If you must touch a sick or dead bird, you should use protective gloves.

Any surfaces that come into contact with raw poultry (such as cutting boards and knives) should always be thoroughly washed with hot, soapy water, and sanitized with a dilute solution of chlorine bleach (one teaspoon per gallon of water) or with water above 170° F. Hands should be washed with soap and water before and after handling raw poultry. Eating only fully cooked eggs and poultry (no pink) will ensure the food is safe, but freezing raw poultry will not kill the H5N1 virus. Dogs and

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A collaborative effort between the Air Force Institute for Operational Health, the Deployment Health Clinical Center, Force Health Protection and Readiness, the Navy Environmental Health Center, the U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine, and the OUSD(P&R)/Military Family and Community Policy



particularly cats may be at risk if they eat infected wild birds. In areas of the world where H5N1 avian flu is found, it is unknown if people are at risk of catching the H5N1 virus from their pets; therefore, it is best to keep pets away from wild birds in those areas. You should, also avoid live bird markets in those countries where H5N1 is present, and deployment bed down locations should avoid areas where domestic poultry are present.

Should the virus mutate so that it can pass easily from person to person, additional protection measures will be communicated. Simple steps you can take now to help protect yourself against many types of infections, including the H5N1 virus, include always covering your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing, and washing your hands frequently. Vaccines to protect people against the current H5N1 avian flu virus are under development and in limited supply. However, it is important for everyone, especially those in high-risk groups (the very young and old, and those with long-term illnesses), to get a seasonal flu shot to keep their immunity up. In the unlikely event you are exposed to H5N1 or develop an H5N1 infection, you may be treated with medications (such as an antiviral like Tamiflu or oseltamivir) to help to fight the infection.

Once there is indication that a pandemic is starting, it is important to ensure that you have adequate supplies of food and water and ample supplies of prescription medicines. Neighborhoods should plan for ways to help those in their communities with special needs. If a pandemic occurs in your community, it is important to avoid crowds. Social gatherings may be cancelled and schools closed to help control the spread of the virus.

How do health care providers tell the difference between the H5N1 avian flu and seasonal flu in people?

For now, the H5N1 virus is not in the U.S. However, the seasonal flu and the H5N1 virus may cause similar symptoms in people. If you are normally a healthy person and have severe flu symptoms, you should discuss your condition with your health care provider. If your health care provider suspects that you may have avian flu (for example, because of recent travel to a country with the virus, or if the virus reaches our shores), he or she can order medical tests to determine what kind of flu virus is involved.

What is the Department of Defense (DoD) doing to protect service members from the H5N1 avian flu virus should it change (“mutate”) to spread from person to person?

The DoD, which plays a key role in the National Pandemic Influenza Response Plan, has developed its own comprehensive DoD Response Plan. Individual installations and commands also have developed plans to respond to H5N1 outbreaks. The DoD has established stockpiles of antiviral medications, antibiotics, vaccine, and equipment to combat a pandemic. To insure its ability to continue to provide health care to beneficiaries, the DoD has acquired supplies of masks and gloves to protect health care workers. The DoD Global Emerging Infectious Disease System provides a global perspective of emerging infections, such as the H5N1 virus. The DoD continues to work closely with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization, and many host nations to track the virus. See the latest Pandemic Flu Fact Sheet for more details:

[http://deploymenthealthlibrary.fhp.osd.mil/products/Pandemic%20Flu%20\(2008\).pdf](http://deploymenthealthlibrary.fhp.osd.mil/products/Pandemic%20Flu%20(2008).pdf)

Additional Resources:

- The Department of Defense Force Health Protection and Readiness Programs has information on avian flu and other deployment health questions: 1-800-497-6261
<https://fhp.osd.mil/aiWatchboard>
- The U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine avian and pandemic flu information page: <http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil/news/influenzaWebsite/pages/resources.htm>
- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) avian flu public hotlines: Public 888-246-2675; Spanish 888-246-2857; and for Clinicians 877-246-4625. The CDC has additional online resources at: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/index.htm>.
- The World Health Organization has information on avian flu online at: http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/.
- Physicians, employers and employees should contact their state or local health department to notify them of any symptomatic employees or suspected exposure incidents at: <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/international/relres.html>

Where Do I Get More Information?

DoD Force Health Protection and Readiness (FHP & R)
Phone: (800) 497-6261
<http://fhp.osd.mil>

U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine (USACHPPM)
Phone: (800) 222-9698
<http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil>

Air Force Institute for Operational Health (AFIOH)
Phone: (888) 232-3764
<http://www.brooks.af.mil/afioh/>

DoD Deployment Health Clinical Center (DHCC)
Phone: (866) 559-1627
<http://www.pdhealth.mil/>

Navy Environmental Health Center (NEHC)
Phone: (757) 953-0700
<http://www.nehc.med.navy.mil>



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