



What is Avian Influenza?

Many strains of influenza viruses can infect birds and form the broad class known as avian influenza or AI, often called “bird flu.” These flu viruses occur naturally among birds and have been recognized as a generalized disease of poultry since 1901.

Some forms are called “low pathogenic,” or LP, while others are referred to as “high pathogenic,” or HP, depending on the risk they pose to the bird that becomes infected. AI can be transmitted easily from bird to bird and can make chickens, ducks and turkeys very sick. Many birds that become ill die.

A common means of transmission is wild birds that carry the virus in the intestine while remaining asymptomatic.

How is AI Spread Among Poultry?

Birds infected with AI shed flu virus in their saliva, nasal secretions and feces. Fecal transmission is the most common mode of spread between birds, with infected birds excreting virus in high concentrations.

Once introduced into a flock, the virus is spread by numerous activities including the movement of birds, contaminated equipment, egg flats, feed trucks and service crews.

Influenza H5N1 virus was first isolated from birds (terns) in South Africa in 1961. H5N1 virus circulates among birds worldwide and can be deadly to birds that contract it.

Have U.S. Poultry Been Infected with the Asian strain H5N1 AI?

No, the U.S. has not been infected with the strain of H5N1 AI, that is impacting Asia and Eastern Europe. In the last several years, other AI strains have been detected in the U.S. Those outbreaks have been contained and the virus eradicated from poultry flocks.

Can Humans Become Sick With Avian Influenza?

The AI virus rarely infects humans. When it does, the cause is typically direct contact by humans with infected birds. Human to human transmission of the disease has never been well-documented. Viruses can evolve, however, and U.S. public health officials are preparing for the remote possibility that the H5N1 virus could spread to the U.S. and impact humans. At this time, however, HP H5N1 AI virus has not been diagnosed in U.S. poultry or U.S. citizens.

Can Americans Contract Avian Influenza from Handling and Preparing Poultry Cuts?

It cannot be stressed enough that the U.S. does not have the form of AI now impacting Asia and Eastern Europe.

It is reassuring to note, however, that the same safe handling practices that ensure safe meat and poultry every day would be effective

in the unlikely event that a person handled poultry containing HP AI virus.

These practices include washing hands before and after handling poultry, cooking whole birds and dark meat to 180 degrees F. and cooking breasts to 170 degrees F. As always, it is important to separate raw and cooked foods.

How Many Outbreaks of AI Have Occurred Worldwide?

From 1959 to 2005 worldwide there have been more than 25 outbreaks in live poultry caused by AI. More than 200 million poultry have died or been killed in an effort to eradicate the disease. A major obstacle to control and eradication in Asia and Eastern Europe is the domestic reservoirs in village poultry industries and domestic ducks and geese (typically raised in rice fields), where HP AI can become epidemic.

These “village industries” stand in stark contrast to the highly controlled and biosecure U.S. poultry industry.

What Is the U.S. doing to prevent the introduction of the disease here?

The U.S. maintains strict controls on imports from affected nations. The U.S. is a net exporter of poultry and does not import Asian poultry.

In addition, the U.S. has an aggressive monitoring program to detect and contain the disease if it occurs in U.S. poultry.

In 2006, the U.S. pledged \$334 million toward a \$1.9 billion effort to control HP AI from spreading further around the world and to reduce the likelihood of a pandemic.

How Is the Disease Treated by the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the World Health Organization?

Countries that import poultry products have imposed trade restrictions to protect animal health, in accordance with the Office of International Epizootics (OIE) Terrestrial Code.

The OIE and the World Health Organization have concluded that any poultry products destined for human consumption from countries currently experiencing outbreaks of AI do not pose a risk to public health because the virus is destroyed at normal cooking temperatures.

The OIE and WHO encourage all countries to report all outbreaks of HP AI and LP H5 or H7 AI diagnosed in poultry or other domestic birds.

U.S. Department of Agriculture

www.usda.gov
PandemicFlu.gov
www.pandemicflu.gov

Helpful Contacts

U.S. Meat and Poultry Hotline
1-888-674-6854