

What is bird flu?

Avian influenza or “bird flu” is an infection found in birds that is caused by the influenza A virus. The virus can be passed from birds to people, although transmission is considered rare. There are many different types of bird flu, and some cause disease while others do not. In recent years, the term bird flu has often been used to describe the H5N1, H5N2, H5N8 and H7N9 avian influenza viruses.

Who is at risk for bird flu?

In most instances, avian influenza viruses do not cause human illness. Only a few of these viruses have developed the ability to infect people. However, some people may become infected when they have prolonged contact with infected birds, especially domestic birds. People also may become ill from exposure to areas or surfaces contaminated with bird feces or respiratory secretions, such as on farms or in live bird markets. Swimming in water where the carcasses of dead, infected birds have been discarded or water that may have been contaminated by feces from infected birds might be another source of exposure. Birds with avian influenza have been documented in every part of the world, but a majority of human cases of bird flu originate in Asia. In 2015, the United States saw many outbreaks of H5 viruses in domestic and wild birds, especially in domestic turkeys and chickens in the Midwest.

What are the symptoms of bird flu?

Most avian influenza viruses do not cause illness in people. However, people infected with avian flu viruses may have a variety of symptoms depending on the type of avian influenza virus they have. For example, some people may only develop mild eye infections. In other instances, symptoms are very similar to that of seasonal human influenza, including fever, chills, headache, cough and body aches. For severe cases, symptoms may lead to death due to pneumonia and other respiratory complications.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The time it takes for a person to develop symptoms after infection is unknown and is likely dependent on the type of influenza virus. Generally, symptoms appear within 10 days of exposure.

How is bird flu spread?

Avian influenza can spread from infected birds to people; however, this occurs very rarely. Most people with bird flu become infected when they have prolonged contact with nasal discharge or fecal droppings of infected birds. In general, people cannot spread avian flu to other people. Very limited person-to-person spread has been documented in family caregivers with close contact to infected individuals. However, most people who care for someone with bird flu do not contract the disease.

Sometimes avian influenza viruses will change over time. If the right changes occur, it may become possible for people to spread this flu virus from person to person more readily. If this happens, the North Dakota Department of Health will provide additional precautionary information to the public.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

Person-to-person spread of bird flu is extremely rare. It is not known how long a person is able to spread bird flu, and this timeframe will likely vary depending on the type of virus.

How is a person diagnosed?

Diagnosis begins with the appearance of classic signs and symptoms of seasonal influenza, including fever, cough, sore throat, congestion and body aches, along with an appropriate exposure, such as a recent history of travel to a country or area where a bird flu has been identified, and/or evidence of prolonged bird exposure, especially exposure to sick birds or their droppings. A laboratory test at the State Public Health Laboratory is required in order to confirm this diagnosis, as commercial influenza test kits currently on the market are not designed to detect avian influenza strains.

What is the treatment?

Antibiotics are not effective against avian influenza. Treatment with an antiviral drug is recommended for cases and their close contacts. However, these drugs should be given within 48 hours after the first symptoms appear to provide the most benefit, and some types of bird flu have shown signs of developing resistance to antiviral treatment.

Does past infection make a person immune?

It is unknown at this time.

Should children or others be excluded from child care, school, work or other activities if they have bird flu?

Yes. For how long someone should be excluded will depend on the type of avian influenza virus and the severity of the human disease it might cause. Consult with your doctor or local or state health department for further guidance. Children should always be excluded from child care or school when they have a fever until that fever free for 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications.

What can be done to prevent the spread of bird flu among people?

The best way to prevent the spread of bird flu is to reduce your exposure to sick and dying birds. View wildlife from a distance and don't touch dead or sick animals. If you notice sick or dying birds, report it to local wildlife or public health officials or veterinarians. If you are traveling to another country, avoid bird markets and bird farms. Also, avoid contact with sick patients who have suspected or confirmed bird flu. If you do have contact with wild birds or domestic poultry, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before resuming normal activities.

Additional Information:

Additional information is available at www.ndflu.com or by calling the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180. For additional information about the disease in birds, call the Board of Animal Health at 701.328.2654 or visit www.agdepartment.com/Programs/Livestock/BOAH/AvianInfluenza.htm.

This disease is a reportable condition in humans and animals. As mandated by North Dakota law, any incidence of this disease shall be reported to the North Dakota Department of Health (human) or the state veterinarian (domestic birds) within 24 hours.

Resources:

1. World Health Organization website: www.who.int/influenza/human_animal_interface/en/
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/