

**Safety and Health Tip****Avian Flu and You!****Special Edition - November 2005**

Recently, news about the potential for a pandemic (a world wide epidemic) of bird flu, also known as avian influenza A (H5N1) has gotten a lot of press and attention. President Bush recently announced a plan that provides funding for early detection, containment, and treatment of an outbreak.

As part of a DOT plan, FRA is preparing detailed guidance in case this new strain of flu becomes infectious to humans who have little or no immunity. It may help to have some facts to begin to put the threat in perspective. The following information comes from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Fact Sheet on Avian Flu.

**What is avian influenza (bird flu)?**

Bird flu is an infection caused by avian (bird) influenza (flu) viruses. These flu viruses occur naturally among birds. Wild birds worldwide carry the viruses in their intestines, but usually do not get sick from them. However, bird flu is very contagious among birds and can make some domesticated birds, including chickens, ducks, and turkeys, very sick and kill them.

**What is the risk to humans from bird flu?**

The risk from bird flu is generally low to most people because the viruses occur mainly among birds and do not usually infect humans. However, during an outbreak of bird flu among poultry (domesticated chicken, ducks, turkeys), there is a possible risk to people who have contact with infected birds or surfaces that have been contaminated with excretions from infected birds. The current outbreak of avian influenza A (H5N1) among poultry in Asia is an example of a bird flu outbreak that has caused human infections and deaths. In such situations, people should avoid contact with infected birds or contaminated surfaces, and should be careful when handling and cooking poultry.

**What is an avian influenza A (H5N1) virus?**

Influenza A (H5N1) virus – also called “H5N1 virus” – is an influenza A virus subtype that occurs mainly in birds. Like all bird flu viruses, H5N1 virus circulates among birds worldwide, is very contagious among birds, and can be deadly.

**What is the H5N1 bird flu that has recently been reported in Asia?**

Outbreaks of influenza H5N1 occurred among poultry in eight countries in Asia (Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam) during late 2003 and early 2004. At that time, more than 100 million birds in the affected countries either died from the disease or were killed in order to try to control the outbreak. By March 2004, the outbreak was reported to be under control. Beginning in late June 2004, however, new deadly outbreaks of influenza H5N1 among poultry were reported by several countries in Asia (Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia [first-time

reports], Thailand, and Vietnam). It is believed that these outbreaks are ongoing. Human infections of influenza A (H5N1) have been reported in Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia.

**What is the risk to humans from the H5N1 virus in Asia?**

The H5N1 virus does not usually infect humans. In 1997, however, the first case of spread from a bird to a human was seen during an outbreak of bird flu in poultry in Hong Kong. The virus caused severe respiratory illness in 18 people, 6 of whom died. Since that time, there have been other cases of H5N1 infection among humans. Most recently, human cases of H5N1 infection have occurred in Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia during large H5N1 outbreaks in poultry. The death rate for these reported cases has been about 50 percent. Most of these cases occurred from contact with infected poultry or contaminated surfaces; however, it is thought that a few cases of human-to-human spread of H5N1 have occurred.

So far, spread of H5N1 virus from person to person has been rare and spread has not continued beyond one person. However, because all influenza viruses have the ability to change, scientists are concerned that the H5N1 virus could one day be able to infect humans and spread easily from one person to another.

Because these viruses do not commonly infect humans, there is little or no immune protection against them in the human population. If the H5N1 virus were able to infect people and spread easily from person to person, an “influenza pandemic” (worldwide outbreak of disease ) could begin. No one can predict when a pandemic might occur. However, experts from around the world are watching the H5N1 situation in Asia very closely and are preparing for the possibility that the virus may begin to spread more easily and widely from person to person.

**What is the risk to people in the United States from the H5N1 bird flu outbreak in Asia?**

The current risk to Americans from the H5N1 bird flu outbreak in Asia is low. The strain of H5N1 virus found in Asia has not been found in the United States. There have been no human cases of H5N1 flu in the United States. It is possible that travelers returning from affected countries in Asia could be infected. Since February 2004, medical and public health personnel have been watching closely to find any such cases.

The “good news” is that very few people have become infected and fewer still have died due to this illness (see the table below).

There is currently no vaccine for this strain (H5N1) of bird flu. There are some drugs that can be used to treat and control the illness in persons with this and other strains of influenza, but the supply of these drugs is in short supply.

It is important to remember some common sense health precautions to help you and your family avoid infection. In that regard, we are re-publishing, as part of this special issue, the Safety Tip from last spring on hand washing.

Hand washing is still one of the most effective practices to prevent the spread of infections. The Centers for Disease Control, National Center for Infectious Diseases has a web page devoted to the subject. From that page: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/op/handwashing.htm>

The most important thing that you can do to keep from getting sick is to wash your hands. By frequently washing you wash away germs that you have picked up from other people, or from contaminated surfaces, or from animals and animal waste.

What happens if you do not wash your hands frequently? You pick up germs from other sources and then you infect yourself when you:

- ▶ Touch your eyes
- ▶ Touch your nose
- ▶ Touch your mouth.

One of the most common ways people catch colds and flu is by rubbing their nose or their eyes after their hands have been contaminated with the virus. If you are infected, you can also spread germs directly to others or onto surfaces that other people touch. And before you know it, everybody around you is getting sick.

The important thing to remember is that, in addition to colds, some pretty serious diseases -- like flu, hepatitis A, meningitis, and infectious diarrhea -- can easily be prevented if people make a habit of washing their hands.

### When should you wash your hands?

You should wash your hands often. Probably more often than you do now because you can't see germs with the naked eye or smell them, so you do not really know where they are hiding.

### It is especially important to wash your hands

- ▶ Before, during, and after you prepare food
- ▶ Before you eat
- ▶ After you use the bathroom
- ▶ After handling animals or animal waste
- ▶ When your hands are dirty, and
- ▶ More frequently when someone in your home is sick.

### What is the correct way to wash your hands?

- ▶ First wet your hands and apply liquid or clean bar soap. Place the bar soap on a rack and allow it to drain.
- ▶ Next rub your hands vigorously together and scrub all surfaces.
- ▶ Continue for 10 - 15 seconds or about the length of a little tune. Water does not have to be hot, cold water will do. It is the soap combined with the scrubbing action that helps dislodge and remove germs.
- ▶ Rinse well and dry your hands.

If you can't wash your hands but still want to disinfect them a very good alternative is one of the alcohol based waterless hand cleaners now on the market. Products like Purell®, Zep® MVP, etc. can be used when soap and water aren't available.

**It is estimated that one out of three people do not wash their hands after using the restroom.** So these tips are even more important when you are out in public.

Washing your hands regularly can certainly save a lot on medical bills. Because it costs less than a penny, you could say that this penny's worth of prevention can save you a \$50 visit to the doctor.

Cumulative Number of Confirmed Human Cases of Avian Influenza A/(H5N1) Reported to WHO as of 24 October 2005

Date of onset	Indonesia		Vietnam		Thailand		Cambodia		Total	
	cases	deaths	cases	deaths	cases	deaths	cases	deaths	cases	deaths
12/26/03 - 03/10/04	0	0	23	16	12	8	0	0	35	24
07/19/04 - 10/08/04	0	0	4	4	5	4	0	0	9	8
12/16/04 - to date	7	4	64	21	2	1	4	4	77	30
Total	7	4	91	41	19	13	4	4	121	62

Notes: Total number of cases includes number of deaths. WHO reports only laboratory-confirmed cases.

**If you have suggestions for future topics, or want to contribute, please contact one of the members of the committee:**

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