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AVIAN INFLUENZA AND WILD BIRDS

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What is Avian Influenza?

Strains of avian influenza have been found in the past in the United States, including California. Wild birds carry many strains of avian influenza, most of which do not make them sick or make other birds sick. Avian influenza (bird flu) is disease caused by a virus. There are several strains of avian influenza. Some cause only minor symptoms in birds, and some cause severe illness and death in birds. Avian influenza viruses have been with us for a long time.

Why is there so much concern in the news about avian influenza?

Many scientists believe an avian influenza virus could mutate and create a new, very contagious human influenza virus. If this happens, there could be a new influenza pandemic, or worldwide epidemic. It is important to remember that AVIAN Influenza is not the same thing as PANDEMIC influenza. However, a strain of avian influenza could mutate to become a pandemic influenza strain.

How easily can people catch avian influenza?

Avian influenza is not easy to catch. Only a few strains of avian influenza have ever caused illness in people, and only small numbers of people in the world have been infected. Most of the people who have caught it were in close contact with infected poultry or the poultry's feces. A few people who caught it were closely nursing and caring for people who had the virus. As of January 10, 2006, no person has been shown to have caught avian influenza from wild birds, but it must be assumed that this is possible.

What strain of avian influenza is of the greatest concern?

There is a strain of avian influenza called High Pathogenicity H5N1 avian influenza that has infected farms in many countries, causing death and the loss of millions of birds. This virus is NOT yet in North America or the United States. This strain also has caused death of many species of wild birds, making it more deadly to birds than most avian influenzas. As of Jan 9, 2006, there have been a total of 146 cases of people catching this strain High Pathogenicity H5N1 in the world (in Southeast Asia, China, and Turkey). Most of the people who have caught the disease have been poultry farmers. The virus may have carried to Turkey from China by migrating birds. Wild waterfowl (such as wild ducks and geese) are thought to be the main carriers of most strains of avian influenza. However, High Pathogenicity H5N1 avian influenza has been found so far in 40-60 species of birds, including tree sparrows, gulls, birds of prey, and others in Asia and Eastern Europe. Scientists worry that this strain (High Pathogenicity H5N1) of avian influenza may mutate to create a new human influenza pandemic, but they do not know this for sure.

If you own birds:

It is important to prevent your birds, either pet birds or poultry, from having contact with wild birds. Do not allow your birds to meet wild birds. Do not allow wild birds to eat from, or defecate into, your birds' food and water bowls. Avian influenza viruses are present in the feces of infected wild birds and poultry. If you have birds that are housed outdoors, make sure the sides of the enclosure can keep out all wild birds (for example, standard chicken wire is not good enough – small wild birds can fly through the holes). Any outdoor enclosure for birds should also have a solid roof, to prevent wild birds from defecating down into the enclosure when they rest on top of it.

If you get a new bird, you should always keep it in a separate area, away from your other birds, for at least a month to make sure no disease is going to appear in the new bird. Report any illnesses in your birds to your veterinarian.

If you have a bird feeder:

Bird feeders are a place where wild birds can give germs to each other, including Salmonella, avian influenza, etc. Help protect the health of wild birds by cleaning your bird feeder once weekly. Wear gloves and work in a well-ventilated area. Clean the feeder with warm soap and water. Kill germs further by applying diluted bleach (1 part bleach to 10 parts water) to the feeder. Wait 10 minutes before rinsing clean. Bleach is irritating to eyes, nose and mouth and can discolor cloth and other material. It is safest to wear goggles and a mask as well as gloves when working with bleach. Do not pour used bleach into the storm drains where it may irritate wildlife (pour into toilet).

If you are a hunter:

Do not handle or eat sick birds. For a list of safety precautions, see this posting on the Alaska Department of Fish and Game website: http://www.adfg.state.ak.us/news/avian_bulletin_9-30-05.pdf

How can I protect myself?

Bird feces, from any bird, can carry a lot of germs, including psittacosis, Salmonella and (potentially) avian influenza. Avoid stepping in or eating near any location where wild birds have defecated. Wash your hands thoroughly if you touch bird feces. It is best not to feed wild birds because this encourages them to congregate and defecate in a concentrated area. When cleaning up bird feces, always wear disposable gloves or gloves that can be disinfected and work in a well-ventilated area. Never sweep dry bird feces because it is dangerous to breathe in the dust; instead, spray them with a disinfectant and wipe them up.

Can I catch it by eating meat or eggs?

The virus does not yet exist in the United States. Agricultural agencies in the US, including in California, have been testing poultry for all strains of avian influenza regularly for many years. The United States has also banned the importation of poultry products from countries that have the High Pathogenicity H5N1 virus.

Proper cooking kills the virus. Eggs should be cooked completely, with no runny yolks. Meat should be cooked thoroughly. There are other more common diseases in the United States, such as Salmonella, that can also infect meat and eggs, so these precautions are important right now. Eggs raised at home should be carefully washed on the outside of the shell with soap (such as dishwashing liquid) and water, and rinsed clean, before being used for food.

What more should I do?

If you see or know of a die-off (group of birds dying) of any species of wild bird in Los Angeles County, please report it to Veterinary Public Health (telephone 562-401-7088, fax 562-401-7112, or at our website <http://lapublichealth.org/vet/disintro.htm>). Follow the news carefully. If a human pandemic influenza strain appears, follow all governmental recommendations. If you hear about an avian influenza strain, ask if it is one of the strains that can infect people or not (remember, most strains of avian influenza do NOT infect people). Keep your birds indoors, away from wild birds. Remember, all bird feces can carry germs, so use gloves and disinfectant, in a well-ventilated area, when cleaning up after birds. Clean and disinfect bird feeders once weekly. Cook meat and eggs thoroughly.

Important Note:

The United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization, and the United States Dept of Interior National Wildlife Health Center have stated that avian influenza in wild birds cannot be controlled by trying to kill wild birds. Attempts to do so would be inhumane, ineffective, and only act to scatter the disease further as surviving birds flee from the area.

Excellent websites for more information on avian influenza and pandemic influenza.

Center's for Disease Control website: www.cdc.gov

US Federal Government's Pandemic flu website: www.pandemicflu.gov

Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations: www.fao.org

National Wildlife Health Center: <http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov>