



Your questions about Avian Influenza Asked & Answered

What is avian influenza?

Bird flu, or avian influenza, is an animal disease caused by viruses that usually infect birds - particularly poultry - but since 1997 have, according to the World Health Organisation, on very rare occasions jumped the species barrier and infected humans. So far this has only happened in 12 countries around the world, 2 of which are in Africa, although bird flu has presented itself within poultry flocks in more than 45 countries, of which 6 are in Africa.

How serious is it?

There are 15 different types of bird flu known to regularly infect birds around the world. Most strains infect only birds (though they can potentially infect other species such as pigs), but they do not infect humans. The type that has mostly affected people is H5N1, of which there is more than one sub-type. The most common is known as the "Wild Strain", and is low-pathogenic. The "Asian strain", on the other hand, is highly pathogenic and is a mutant of the lower-pathogenic "Wild Strain".

Is there avian influenza in South Africa?

Avian influenza is nothing new in wild bird populations, but to date South Africa remains free of the highly-pathogenic H5N1 strain of avian influenza.

How is it transmitted?

Humans generally acquire the virus through direct contact with living, infected birds or their faeces. This has happened almost exclusively in the informal sector where people are in very close contact with their poultry. Even then it has been shown to be very difficult to get the disease. Spread between people has occurred on only one or possibly two occasions.

Should I avoid poultry products in order to protect my family?

The simple and truthful answer is no. It isn't necessary to avoid eating chicken and/or eggs - thoroughly cooked, locally produced poultry products from certified abattoirs and pack houses are safe to consume. If highly-pathogenic H5N1 should present in South Africa, by simply cooking all poultry products correctly, you will inactivate the virus completely. As a rule of thumb: hard boiled eggs are completely safe to eat as is meat cooked until the juices run clear.

What other precautions should I take?

Good hygiene always helps with prevention, so continue to wash your hands before and after preparing food to avoid infection, as you should do to prevent all potential infections from food, such as bacterial food poisoning. Also, make sure that all food cleaning and preparation surfaces are thoroughly cleaned.

Is there a treatment for bird flu in humans?

There is one antiviral drug that may be helpful in treating bird flu in humans. It is oseltamivir, known in most of the world as Tamiflu™. It can be taken by poultry workers for example, who have been exposed to infected birds to prevent them from getting bird flu.

Are there any advanced warning signs that highly-pathogenic H5N1 is entering a country?

None whatsoever. Not one of the 45 countries infected so far detected early warning signs, and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and World Health Organisation (WHO) confirm this. The operative key in dealing with all animal and public health threats is vigilant monitoring and surveillance.