

The University of North Carolina at Pembroke
Avian Influenza (Bird Flu)

Introduction

Although there have been no outbreaks of Avian Flu in the United States, UNC Pembroke community members may have questions regarding the flu. Utilizing information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), responses to common questions have been developed.

Q. What is avian influenza (bird flu)?

A. Avian influenza is a disease of birds caused by avian (bird) influenza (flu) viruses. These flu viruses occur naturally among birds. Wild birds worldwide may carry the viruses in their intestines, but usually do not get sick from them. However, avian influenza is very contagious among birds and some strains of avian influenza virus (called highly pathogenic strains) can make some domesticated birds, including chickens, ducks, and turkeys very sick and kill them. Some subtypes of avian influenza can also infect humans. At this time we do not have highly pathogenic strains of avian influenza virus in the U.S. See: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/gen-info/facts.htm>

Q. What is an avian influenza A (H5N1) virus?

A. Influenza A (H5N1) virus – also called “H5N1 virus” – is a subtype of the influenza A strain of virus that occurs mainly in birds. It was first isolated from birds (terns) in South Africa in 1961. An avian influenza H5N1 virus may be highly pathogenic and cause serious illness and death in birds or it may be relatively harmless, depending on the particular H5N1 virus and the species of bird that is infected. Recently, a highly pathogenic H5N1 virus in Asia has caused severe disease in birds, humans, and other animals. See: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/gen-info/facts.htm>

Q. How does avian influenza spread?

A. Infected birds shed flu virus in their saliva, nasal secretions, and feces. Susceptible birds become infected when they have contact with contaminated excretions or surfaces that are contaminated with excretions from infected birds. The vast majority of avian influenza cases in humans in other countries have resulted from close contact with infected poultry. See: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/gen-info/facts.htm>

Q. What are the symptoms of avian influenza in humans?

A. Symptoms of avian influenza in humans have ranged from typical flu-like symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches) to eye infections, pneumonia, severe respiratory diseases (such as acute respiratory distress), and other severe and life-threatening complications. The symptoms of avian influenza in people will depend on which subtype of the virus caused the infection. At this time we do not have strains of avian influenza in the U.S. which can infect people. See: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/gen-info/facts.htm>

Q. What is an influenza pandemic and how does it differ from the current H5N1 virus outbreak in Asia?

A. A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza A virus emerges for which there is little or no immunity in the human population, and it begins to cause serious illness, spreading easily person-to-person worldwide. Many scientists believe it is a matter of time until the next influenza pandemic occurs. However, the timing and severity of the next pandemic cannot be predicted. Influenza pandemics occurred three times in the past century – in 1918-19, 1957-58, and 1968-69. The current H5N1 avian influenza virus spreads from bird to bird and from bird to person. It does not spread easily from person to person. Public health officials are concerned that the current H5N1 avian influenza virus could mutate into a strain which can easily spread from person to person and cause a global pandemic of influenza in people. See <http://pandemicflu.gov/> and <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic/> for more information about pandemics.

Q. Are there any travel restrictions or advisories in place for faculty, staff, and students traveling abroad, or for those planning to visit campus from abroad?

A. At this time there are no travel restrictions. In the event of a major outbreak of human infection, travel restrictions are likely. The CDC maintains a Traveler's Health Web site that includes information on health related recommendations for travel destinations around the world at <http://www.cdc.gov/travel/destinat.htm>. Additionally, the CDC provides guidelines for airlines and cruise ships arriving from areas with avian influenza or carrying passengers suspected of being infected with avian influenza at <http://www.cdc.gov/travel/cruiships.htm>

Additional key Web sites for in-depth information on avian influenza and pandemic planning and response activities are located at:

- North Carolina Department of Public Health Influenza Web site:
<http://www.epi.state.nc.us/epi/gcdc/pandemic.html>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Avian Influenza Web site:
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/>
- U.S. Department of Agriculture Avian Influenza Web site:
http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usdahome?navtype=SU&navid=AVIAN_INFLUENZA
- Official U.S. Government Comprehensive Web site for information on Pandemic Flu and Avian Influenza:
<http://pandemicflu.gov/>
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration – Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition Avian Influenza and Food Safety Web site:
<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/avfluqa.html>