

WHAT IS AVIAN INFLUENZA?

Many strains of influenza viruses can infect birds and form the broad class of viruses known as avian influenza or AI, often called “bird flu.” These flu viruses occur naturally among birds and have been recognized as a generalized disease of poultry since 1901.

Some forms of the viruses are called “low pathogenic,” or LP, while others are referred to as “high pathogenic,” or HP, depending on the risk they pose to the infected bird. AI can be transmitted easily from bird to bird and can make chickens, ducks, and turkeys very sick. Many birds that become ill will die.

A common means of transmission is wild birds that carry the virus in the intestine and respiratory tract while remaining asymptomatic.

How is Avian Influenza spread among poultry?

Birds infected with AI shed flu virus in their saliva, nasal secretions and feces. Fecal transmission is the most common mode of spread between birds, with infected birds excreting virus in high concentrations.

Once introduced into a flock, the virus is spread by numerous activities including the movement of birds, contaminated equipment, egg flats, feed trucks and service crews.

Influenza H5N1 virus was first recognized as responsible for HP AI in 1959 in Scotland. H5N1 virus circulates among birds worldwide and can be deadly to birds that contract it.

Can Humans become sick with Avian Influenza?

The AI virus rarely infects humans. When it does, the cause is typically direct contact by humans with infected birds. In no instance has the virus spread beyond a first generator of close contacts or caused illness in the general community. Viruses can evolve, however, and U.S. public health officials have prepared for the remote possibility that the AI virus could spread to the U.S. and impact humans.

Can Americans contract Avian Influenza from handling and preparing poultry cuts?

It is reassuring to note that the same safe handling practices that ensure safe meat and poultry every day would be effective in the unlikely event that a person handled poultry containing AI virus.

These practices include washing hands before and after handling poultry, and separating raw and cooked foods. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends cooking poultry to a minimum of 165 degrees F to ensure safety. Higher temperatures may be used to achieve the texture and degree of doneness that consumers may prefer.

How many outbreaks of Avian Influenza have occurred worldwide?

From 1959 to 2008 worldwide there have been at least 60 countries that have experienced outbreaks in live poultry caused by AI. More than 250

million poultry have died or been killed in an effort to eradicate the disease. A major obstacle to control and eradication in these affected countries is the domestic reservoirs in village poultry industries and domestic ducks and geese.

These “village industries” stand in stark contrast to the highly controlled and biosecure U.S. poultry industry.

What is the U.S. doing to prevent the introduction of the disease here?

The U.S. maintains strict controls on imports from countries where HP AI virus have been detected. The U.S. is a net exporter of poultry and does not import poultry from countries where HP AI is not controlled.

In addition, the U.S. has an aggressive testing program to detect and contain the disease if it occurs in U.S. poultry.

In 2007, the U.S. budgeted \$82 million for AI control programs, including surveillance testing and contingency and control programs at grow out facilities if the AI virus is detected.

How is the disease treated by the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the World Health Organization?

Countries that import poultry products have imposed trade restrictions when HP AI has been detected to protect animal health, in accordance with the OIE Terrestrial Code.

The OIE and the World Health Organization (WHO) have concluded that any poultry products destined for human consumption from countries currently experiencing outbreaks of AI do not pose a risk to public health because the virus is destroyed at normal cooking temperatures.

The OIE and WHO encourage all countries to report all outbreaks of HP AI and LP H5 or H7 AI diagnosed in poultry or other domestic birds.

Helpful Links

North American Meat Institute
<http://www.meatinstitute.org>
<http://www.meatsafety.org>

U.S. Department of Agriculture
<http://www.usda.gov>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
<http://www.pandemicflu.gov>

World Organization for Animal Health
<http://www.oie.int/>

World Health Organization
<http://www.who.int/en/>