Concerned about Avian Influenza?

U.S. poultry is healthy and safe. An aggressive, `multi-firewall' strategy is in place in the U.S. to prevent avian influenza, detect it if it occurs in U.S. birds and contain and eradicate it rapidly. More information may be found at www.poultrysafety.org

Helpful Contacts

U.S. Meat and Poultry Hotline 1-888-674-6854

American Meat Institute Foundation

1150 Connecticut Ave., NW 12th Floor Washington, DC 20036 202/587-4200 www.poultrysafety.org

U.S. Department of Agriculture www.usda.gov



Consumer Questions and Answers About Avian Influenza or 'Bird Flu'

The recent flurry of publicity about avian influenza, often called 'bird flu,' has led some consumers to ask questions about what is being done to prevent the disease and protect American consumers. The good news is that the U.S. has a `multi-firewall' strategy in place to prevent the disease, detect it if occurs in U.S. birds and to contain and eradicate the disease rapidly. Following are some questions commonly asked by consumers. Additional information may be found at www.poultrysafety.org.

What is avian influenza?

Many strains of influenza viruses can infect birds and cause an infection known as avian influenza or AI, often called "bird flu." These flu viruses occur naturally among birds and have been recognized as a poultry disease since 1901.

Some forms are called "low pathogenic," while others are referred to as "high pathogenic," depending on the risk they pose to the bird that becomes infected. High pathogenic avian influenza can be transmitted easily from bird to bird and can make chickens, ducks and turkeys very sick. Many birds that become ill die.

The disease is readily apparent to those who produce poultry and typically makes birds so sick they do cannot be transported for processing.

How is avian influenza spread among poultry?

Birds infected with avian influenza shed flu virus in their saliva, nasal secretions and droppings. That is why it is so important to contain poultry raised for food under secure conditions, as we do in the U.S.

How is U.S. poultry production different from production in other parts of the world?

In the U.S., poultry production is done under carefully controlled and contained conditions where biosecurity and limited access to live birds is the norm.

In other parts of the world, while many sophisticated poultry operations do exist, it is not uncommon to see community-based poultry operations that are more open and less secure. In some cases, poultry live in backyards or wander streets.

Free movement of poultry in these regions can increase the risk of transmission from flock to flock. And direct contact between birds and humans in these uncontrolled conditions can increase the risk to humans if a bird is infected. These high risk conditions are virtually non-existent in the U.S.

Have U.S. poultry been infected with the 'Asian' strain H5N1?

No, there has never been an outbreak of the high pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza strain now impacting Asia, Europe and Africa. In the last several years, other avian influenza strains have been detected in the U.S. Those outbreaks have been contained and the virus eradicated from poultry flocks.

Does the U.S. import poultry?

Nearly all poultry sold in the U.S. meat case is raised and processed in the U.S. A small percentage of poultry sold domestically is imported from Canada – a nation that has the same programs in place to prevent, detect and eradicate this strain of the virus.

Can humans become sick with avian influenza?

The avian influenza virus rarely infects humans. When it does, according to the Centers for Disease Control, the cause is typically direct contact between humans and infected birds. In the U.S., such contact is extremely rare and those who need to handle live poultry receive special training to protect themselves.

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

The U.S. has a `multi-firewall' strategy in place to prevent the disease in U.S. poultry and detect, contain and eradicate high pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza virus if it does occur.

The U.S. maintains strict controls on imports from affected nations and is a net exporter of poultry. In addition, the U.S. has an aggressive monitoring program to detect and contain the disease if it occurs in U.S. poultry. Federal officials also have plans in place to contain and eradicate the disease from U.S. poultry if it occurs here.

Can Americans contract avian influenza from handling and preparing poultry cuts?

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the chance of infected poultry entering the processing system is extremely low. Infected birds are typically too ill to be transported to processing plants. Federal veterinarians also check the health of all birds before they are processed to ensure that only healthy poultry enter the U.S. processing system.

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

These practices include: keeping raw meat and poultry separate from other foods; washing working surfaces, utensils and hands after touching raw meat or poultry; and cooking thoroughly. The government recommends cooking poultry to a minimum of 165 F. to ensure safety -- a temperature sufficient to destroy the avian influenza virus in the unlikely event that it were present.