



Mayor Thomas M. Menino

Public Health Fact Sheet

Boston Public Health Commission
Communicable Disease Control
1010 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, MA 02118
617-534-5611 (phone) • 617-534-5905 (fax)

Avian Influenza (Bird Flu)

What is avian influenza (bird flu)?

Avian influenza or “bird flu” is an infection caused by viruses that normally affect birds. While all birds are thought to be vulnerable to avian influenza, poultry including chickens and turkeys tend to become very ill with certain strains of avian flu. There are many different types of avian influenza. Although avian influenza viruses usually do not infect humans, in some instances the virus has caused illness among humans. Of particular concern now is the H5N1 avian influenza, which was first reported in 1997, but has not caused much illness in humans until recently.

How does avian influenza spread?

Avian influenza can spread directly from infected birds to people who are in close contact with the infected bird(s) or their environment (e.g., dirty cages or bird droppings). In the current outbreak, avian influenza has not spread easily from person to person. Nearly all people ill with H5N1 avian influenza became infected through direct contact with infected poultry or their contaminated secretions/feces.

What are the symptoms of avian influenza in people?

The symptoms of avian influenza range from mild flu-like symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, sore throat and muscle aches) to severe breathing problems and even death.

Is there a test for avian influenza?

Yes. There is a test that can be done to determine if you have been exposed to the H5N1 avian influenza virus that is circulating in Southeast Asia.

How is avian influenza treated in humans?

Treatment consists mainly of supportive care. Several medications are available that may have some benefit in treating or reducing the symptoms of bird flu.

Is avian influenza in Boston?

There are no known cases of H5N1 avian influenza in Boston. Influenza, including avian influenza, is reportable to the Boston Public Health Commission if confirmed by any laboratory test.

What can be done to stop the spread of avian influenza?

There have been human cases of H5N1 avian influenza in persons from Southeast Asia since 2003 (a current list can be found at http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/country/en/index.html). H5N1 avian influenza has been found in birds in both Southeast Asia and Europe (a current list can be found at http://www.oie.int/downld/AVIAN%20INFLUENZA/A_AI-Asia.htm). Across the world steps are being taken to decrease the spread of disease, these steps include quarantine and “culling” (killing) infected or potentially exposed birds and disposing of them in a way to lessen the likelihood of infection. There is also a vaccine for domestic poultry, but the vaccine is expensive and each bird requires multiple vaccinations. At this time, there is not a vaccine to protect people against the H5N1 avian influenza, but there are a number of companies working on such a vaccine.

Is it safe to eat eggs and poultry in the United States?

Yes. H5N1 has not been found in birds in the United States. Currently there is no evidence to suggest that eating eggs or poultry in the United States could cause infection with avian influenza. There is some evidence to suggest that humans can get this virus by eating uncooked duck blood from affected areas, therefore it is important to follow normal precautions such as cooking poultry and poultry products (including eggs) thoroughly. Uncooked poultry or poultry products, including blood, should not be consumed. All items (including hands and utensils) that are in contact with poultry or poultry juices should be washed thoroughly.

What can I do?

There are several precautionary measures people can take especially if traveling to areas of Southeast Asia.

1. *Get an annual flu shot.*

A flu shot every year can reduce your risk of getting seasonal flu, however, it will not protect you from avian flu.

2. *Avoid close contact*

Avoid close contact with sick people. Also, avoid contact with birds in rural areas or on small farms

3. *Avoid areas such as live bird markets or places where there are dead or dying birds*

These areas have the potential for transmitting diseases including bird flu.

4. *Practice general food safety*

Ensure all food is thoroughly cooked.

5. *Cover your mouth and nose.*

Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.
This may prevent those around you from getting sick.

6. *Clean your hands.*

Washing your hands often will help protect you from many different germs.

7. *Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.*

Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose or mouth.

Where to go for up to date information about avian flu:

CDC: Latest Information on Avian Flu

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/>

CDC: Avian Flu Fact Sheet

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/gen-info/pdf/avianflufacts.pdf>

WHO: Avian Flu Fact Sheet

http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/

If you are traveling:

CDC: Latest Avian Flu Travel Information

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/outbreaks/travel.htm>

*For more information, please contact:
Boston Public Health Commission
Communicable Disease Control
(617) 534-5611 or www.bphc.org/cdc*