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Avian influenza or 'bird flu'

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Avian influenza or "bird flu" is a highly infectious viral disease which primarily affects birds, but on rare occasions can also be contracted by humans and other mammals. There are many different strains and sub-types of the disease, some more pathogenic than others.

The strain of bird flu which is currently causing fear is the highly pathogenic H5N1. It has affected many countries worldwide, including parts of Asia, Africa and Europe. H5N1 can spread rapidly through poultry flocks, and wild birds are considered to be contributing to its spread around the world. It does not spread easily from birds to humans, and the chances of being infected are extremely low. However some cases of H5N1 in humans have been detected, where the affected people were known to have come into very close contact with infected birds.

Bird flu was thought to infect only birds until the first human cases were seen in Hong Kong in 1997.

Birds excrete the virus in their faeces. If the faeces dry out and are pulverised, the virus can be inhaled.

Symptoms in humans are similar to other types of flu - fever, malaise, a sore throat and coughing. People can also develop conjunctivitis. The virus can cause illness and death in humans.

By January 2007, the World Health Organization (WHO) had confirmed 270 cases of H5N1 in humans in Azerbaijan, Cambodia, China, Djibouti, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Thailand, Turkey and Vietnam, which lead to 164 deaths.

There is no vaccine as yet, but prototypes to protect against the H5N1 strain are being produced. However antiviral drugs, such as Tamiflu, which are already available and are being stockpiled by countries such as the UK, may help limit the symptoms and reduce the chances of the disease spreading to humans.

Tests have confirmed that the avian flu which killed 2,600 turkeys at a farm in Suffolk is the H5N1 virus.

Food

Avian influenza is not transmitted through properly cooked food. To date, there is no evidence to indicate that anyone has become infected following the consumption of properly cooked poultry or poultry products, even when these foods were contaminated with the H5N1 virus. (The only food handlers thought to be at risk are those involved in the slaughter and preparation of meat that may be infected).

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) and The World Health Organization (WHO) consider that avian flu does not pose a food safety risk for UK consumers. They advise that in areas free from the disease, poultry, poultry products and eggs can be prepared and eaten as usual (following good hygiene practices and proper cooking).

The H5N1 virus is sensitive to heat. Normal temperatures used for cooking poultry (70°C in all parts of the food) will kill the virus. Check that birds are cooked properly in the thickest part of the leg. The meat should not be pink or red and the juices should not have any pink or red in them. Cook eggs and foods containing eggs thoroughly (so that the yolks are no longer "runny"). Raw eggs should not be used in foods that will not be cooked.

Proper food preparation can prevent many food-borne diseases. Follow the WHO 'Five keys to safer food':

- **Keep clean**
- **Separate raw and cooked**
- **Cook thoroughly**
- **Keep food at safe temperatures**
- **Use safe water and raw materials**

<http://www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/consumer/5keys/en/index.html>

More information

For more information see the following websites:

- Department of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/>
- Department of Health: <http://www.dh.gov.uk/>
- Health Protection Agency: <http://www.hpa.org.uk/>
- Food Standards Agency: <http://www.foodstandards.gov.uk>