

Bird Flu

There are at least 15 different types of avian influenza that routinely infect birds around the world. The current outbreak is caused by a strain known as H5N1, which is highly contagious among birds and rapidly fatal. Unlike many other strains of avian influenza, it can be transmitted to humans, causing severe illness and death.

Bird flu is not the same as SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome). Although their symptoms are similar, SARS is caused by completely different viruses. Influenza viruses also are more contagious and cannot be as readily contained as SARS by isolating people who have the infection.

Influenza viruses are highly unstable and have the ability to mutate rapidly, potentially jumping from one animal species to another. Scientists fear the bird flu virus could evolve into a form that is easily spread between people, resulting in an extremely contagious and lethal disease. This could happen if someone already infected with the human flu virus catches the bird flu. The two viruses could recombine inside the victim's body, producing a hybrid that could readily spread from person to person.

The resulting virus likely would be something humans have never been exposed to before. With no immune defenses, the infection could cause devastating illness, such as occurred in the 1918-19 Spanish flu pandemic, which killed an estimated 40 million to 50 million worldwide.

Symptoms

Bird flu can cause a range of symptoms in humans. Some patients report fever, cough, sore throat and muscle aches. Others suffer from eye infections, pneumonia, acute respiratory distress and other severe and life-threatening complications.

Transmission

In rural areas, the H5N1 virus is easily spread from farm to farm among domestic poultry through the feces of wild birds. The virus can survive for up to four days at 71 F (22 C) and more than 30 days at 32 F (0 C). If frozen, it can survive indefinitely.

So far in this outbreak, human cases have been blamed on direct contact with infected chickens and their droppings. People who catch the virus from birds can pass it on to other humans, although the disease is generally milder in those who caught it from an infected person rather than from birds.

If the virus mutates and combines with a human influenza virus, it could be spread through person-to-person transmission in the same way the ordinary human flu virus is spread.

Treatment

Flu drugs exist that may be used both to prevent people from catching bird flu and to treat those who have it. The virus appears to be resistant to two older generic flu drugs, amantadine and rimantadine. However, the newer flu drugs Tamiflu and Relenza are expected to work – though supplies could run out quickly if an outbreak occurs.

Currently there is no vaccine, although scientists are working to develop one. It probably will take several months to complete and may not be ready in time to stop a widespread human outbreak, if one occurs.

Preparation and Protection

Stock enough food, water and other supplies for at least ONE week (more wouldn't hurt). Even if a pandemic does not strike, these are supplies that you need to prepare for all hazards in the Puget Sound Region. **DO IT NOW!** If you become ill, you won't be able to make a trip to the local grocery store.

There is some speculation that flu vaccine may provide some type of protection, so it is recommended that those at risk (ages 20 to 45) get the regular seasonal flu shot.

Wash hands regularly with soap and water. If not available, liquid sanitizers are a good alternative.

Practice good cough and sneeze etiquette. When coughing or sneezing, it is recommended to cover your mouth with a tissue or with your inner elbow if a tissue is not available (not your bare hands).

Most importantly, you need to recognize flu symptoms and **STAY HOME**. Symptoms include high fever, headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose and muscle aches. If you develop an illness with these symptoms, contact your health care provider or, if severe, call 9-1-1.

Avoid contact with people known to have the flu or who appear to have a respiratory illness.

Information provided by
Pierce County Department of Emergency Management

More Information

Pandemic Flu Fact Sheet Provided by Pierce County Department of Emergency Management