



NEWS RELEASE

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Alabama authorities seek to minimize impact of avian influenza

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Alabama Department of Public Health is aware of the possibility of an avian influenza pandemic and has drafted a plan to help minimize its impact.

Pandemics of influenza occur when a new strain of influenza virus circulates worldwide among people who have no prior immunity to the strain. Current attention about the possibility of a worldwide outbreak of influenza is centered on the circulating strain of an avian influenza virus called H5N1. Scientists are concerned about this strain because most of the world's population is susceptible to it and it has already caused several human illnesses and deaths.

"To be easily spread from person to person, the avian influenza virus must undergo genetic changes," said State Health Officer Dr. Donald Williamson. "These changes most likely would occur in persons simultaneously infected with both a human influenza virus and the avian influenza virus."

So far, the virus does not spread easily from person to person, which it must do to become a cause of pandemic disease. The H5N1 virus can be carried by migratory birds, and some westward spread of the virus has already occurred from Southeast Asia.

The department also is working with the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries to develop plans to protect workers who could be exposed to infected poultry.

Influenza spreads through contact with infectious secretions from someone shedding the virus. For example, coughing generates droplets that contain the virus. So being within three feet of a coughing person might lead to exposure to the virus, as might rubbing one's eyes after handling an object such as a door knob that was contaminated by a person who coughed into his hand.

Airborne spread can occur among crowded groups in enclosed spaces. During an influenza outbreak it will be important for persons to practice good "respiratory hygiene." Persons should:

- cover their cough or sneeze with a tissue or their sleeve,
- dispose of the tissue properly, and
- wash their hands afterwards with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner.

Public health authorities around the world are focusing efforts on avian and pandemic influenza. The World Health Organization and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have provided guidance about developing pandemic influenza plans. Alabama has also completed an initial draft of its plan, and welcomes public comment on it. This written plan is available at www.adph.org under "Fast Find." 10/24/05