

Bird Flu: fact versus myth

The topic of avian influenza, also known as “Bird Flu,” is being discussed on talk shows, in magazines and on the Internet. It is a topic that has not always been reported truthfully and accurately, but the Alabama Department of Public Health wants to make sure that Alabamians have the correct information and can, in the future, better distinguish between fact and myth.

Avian influenza is a strain of influenza that mainly infects migrating birds, waterfowl, poultry, and some wild birds. It is very contagious among birds and can make some domesticated birds such as chickens, ducks, and turkeys very sick and kill them. Infected birds shed influenza virus in their saliva, nasal secretions and feces.

All influenza viruses have the ability to mutate (change). Scientists are concerned that if the H5N1 virus mutates, it could infect people. If this occurs many people will likely catch the virus because no one has immunity against this particular strain of influenza. As a result, an influenza pandemic (worldwide outbreak of the disease) could begin.

“We can not predict when the next pandemic will occur, but we do know that any pandemic influenza plans made now can help during any emergency,” said _____ (Public Health spokesperson).

More than 250 human cases of avian influenza have been reported in Asia and Europe to date, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Most of these cases have occurred from people having direct or close contact with infected poultry or surfaces contaminated with secretions/excretions from infected birds. The majority of these cases have occurred in previously healthy children and young adults. So far the spread of the virus among persons infected has been limited.

Symptoms of the H5N1 virus are usually the same as those of human influenza symptoms, but are more severe. This includes fever, cough, sore throat, muscle aches, pneumonia, and severe respiratory disease. Of the cases reported, more than half of those persons infected have died.

Federal, state and local governments are working together to plan for a possible pandemic. Vaccines and antivirals will be limited and reserved for health care workers and first responders. People should talk to their health care provider now about pandemic influenza, as many providers may not be available during a pandemic outbreak.

“We want to encourage people now to practice basic public health measures---get seasonal flu vaccine, wash hands frequently with soap and water, cover your cough, and stay away from people who are sick,” said _____ (Public Health spokesperson).

The virus cannot be caught by the consumption of thoroughly cooked poultry. According to United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), poultry parts should be cooked at 170 degrees Fahrenheit.

Although there have been no cases of persons catching the virus from dead birds, the public can contact the USDA Wildlife Services in Auburn at (334) 844-5670 if a sick or dead bird is found instead of disposing of it themselves.

For more information on avian influenza, please visit the following Web sites:

- Alabama Department of Public Health: www.adph.org/pandemicflu
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: www.pandemicflu.gov
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov
- National Institutes of Health: www.nih.gov
- World Health Organization: www.who.int