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Patient Health Advisory Information

The Avian Influenza



The **Avian Influenza**, or **avian flu**, is an infectious viral infection affecting birds. It is caused by the **type A influenza virus** and literally causes a flu infection in birds.

Avian flu was first identified in Italy more than 100 years ago and occurs worldwide. There are more than 15 subtypes of the virus and the effect it has on birds can range from that of a mild flu illness with

no mortality to a very severe infection with a 100% mortality rate.

The virus subtype that was identified recently in Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, Cambodia, Indonesia and lately in Thailand is one such example that causes a very severe bird infection and has been labelled H5N1.

This H5N1 virus was the same virus that occurred in Hong Kong in 1997 resulting in the mass culling of all the chickens by the authorities in the territory.

The avian influenza viruses normally do not infect species other than birds and pigs. However, in the Hong Kong outbreak in 1997, 18 humans were found to be infected with the same H5N1 virus, of whom 6 died. Investigations conducted back then determined that the 18 who were infected had come into close contact with live poultry infected with the H5N1 virus. Further studies at the genetic level later revealed that the virus had indeed jumped directly from the birds to humans.

How dangerous is the Avian Flu virus?

The H5N1 appears to be highly pathogenic and infectious. The fact that it can cross from birds to humans is of course, especially alarming.

Currently Vietnam, Japan, South Korea and China (Taiwan) have declared cases of avian influenza in livestock of the H5N1 subtype. Only Vietnam and Thailand has declared human cases of avian influenza.

The main worry is that the virus may mutate such that it can be spread from one human being to another. Should this be the case, the avian flu virus would cause considerable concern in the community.

So far, there has been no conclusive evidence that show that the H5N1 can pass between humans.

Should I be worried about catching the Avian Flu?

To date, there have been no cases of avian flu reported in Singapore and the government has taken steps to ensure that this remains so. The MOH has sent out directives to all medical practitioners to advise vigilance for the possible emergence of avian flu in Singapore. Of particular note, doctors are asked to look out for patients who:

- Display flu-like symptoms **and**
- Have a travel history to Vietnam or Thailand **and**
- Have been exposed to live poultry in those countries.

The ministry has not issued travel advisories against travel to any country because of avian flu. Nonetheless, they caution that strict infection control procedures should be adopted where applicable to minimise droplet transmission. These would include:

- Avoid coming into contact with live poultry or birds when travelling to affected countries
- Washing your hands regularly
- Avoiding overly crowded areas whenever possible
- Seeking medical attention if you develop flu symptoms after returning from the affected countries.

What precautions should I take?

The following are common sense advice that you can adopt to protect yourself to some extent:

- Keep a fair distance from people who have the flu and are sneezing and coughing openly. The virus is spread through air droplets and you can pick up the virus through inhalation.
- Wash your hands frequently to reduce your risk of picking up the virus. The virus can be transmitted by hand contact as well.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle. Exercise regularly, eat wisely and if you can, keep your stress levels low. Your primary defence against the flu virus is your body's immune response, which is related to how healthy you are.
- Take Vitamin C regularly. Vitamin C helps in maintaining a healthy immune system. Taking Vitamin C regularly (at least 200mg a day), especially during the flu season, will be beneficial in preventing you from getting the flu.





What about vaccinations?

The current vaccinations available worldwide do not protect against the H5N1 virus. It would take at least 4 months for a vaccine to be developed and produced in sufficient quantities to confer protection against the avian flu.

Nonetheless, the usefulness of having an influenza vaccination would be to protect yourself from the other flu infections to minimise confusion should you come down with flu symptoms.

If you intend to travel to temperate countries in the Northern Hemisphere, MOH recommends that those 6 months and older protect themselves against influenza through vaccination.

In addition, you should also be vaccinated if you suspect that you might be exposed to infected chickens while overseas. This is to avoid the simultaneous infection of human influenza and avian influenza which may raise the possibility of the re-assortment of the virus genes that could trigger an influenza pandemic.

What about antibiotics?

The avian flu cannot be treated by antibiotics.

Antibiotics are used to treat bacterial infections. The avian flu is caused by a virus, not a bacteria. As such, it has no effect on the avian flu. In fact, it may be more detrimental to take antibiotics inappropriately hoping that it would protect you from the avian flu.



Studies to date suggest that some prescription medications approved for human influenza strains would be effective in treating avian influenza infection in humans. Please consult your doctor for advice.

Is it safe to eat chicken, eggs and other poultry?

There is currently no evidence that you can acquire avian influenza by eating chicken, eggs and other poultry that has been thoroughly cooked.

Furthermore, AVA has high standards for import of poultry into Singapore. Imports of poultry from countries with cases of avian influenza are not permitted. As such, it is highly unlikely that you could acquire avian influenza from eating chicken, eggs or other poultry.



Is it safe to handle chickens, eggs and other poultry bought from the market or supermarket?

The Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) has high standards for import of poultry into Singapore.

Imports of poultry from countries with cases of avian influenza are not permitted. As such, it is highly unlikely that you would acquire avian influenza from handling chickens, eggs and other poultry bought from the market or supermarket. However, proper hygiene practices like thorough washing of hands after preparing these food products are strongly encouraged.

Is it safe to keep birds or poultry as pets or come into contact with live birds and poultry in local farms, neighbourhoods and the nature reserves?

Currently, there are no known cases of avian influenza in Singapore.

AVA also regularly monitors poultry in local farms and migratory birds in the Sungei Buloh Nature Reserve for avian influenza. However, proper hygiene practices like washing of hands after handling birds and poultry, especially when they are dirtied by respiratory secretions e.g. after sneezing are encouraged.

Conclusion

The avian influenza is not a new disease but one that has health concerns because it has been shown to be able to infect humans. However, it appears that it cannot be passed from humans to humans. As such, the primary precaution to take would be to avoid coming into contact with live infected birds.

To date, Singapore is avian flu virus free and measures are being taken to ensure that the virus does not come into Singapore.

