

H5N1 Avian Flu *For Servicemembers and their Families*

Important facts:

- Avian influenza, also called avian flu or bird flu, is caused by a group of viruses found naturally in birds. There are many avian flu viruses. One type, called “highly pathogenic H5N1 virus,” has caused serious illness and death in a small number of people in Asia since 2003.
- All references to “the H5N1 avian flu virus” in this fact sheet are referring to highly pathogenic H5N1 avian flu virus.
- The H5N1 avian flu virus is not present in birds or people in the United States.
- The H5N1 virus in its current form does not pass easily from person to person. A vaccine against the H5N1 avian flu virus is under development. Common measures such as covering your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing and keeping your hands clean help prevent the spread of viruses.
- People infected with the H5N1 virus will probably have severe flu symptoms. These symptoms usually include fever, sore throat, cough, pneumonia, muscle aches, and diarrhea. Only a health care provider can determine what type of flu virus you have.
- While the H5N1 avian flu virus has killed millions of birds, it is not a pandemic in people, and there is no evidence that it will become a pandemic (global outbreak) in people in its current form.

What is avian flu?

Avian flu, or bird flu, is an infection caused by flu viruses that occur naturally in wild birds and poultry. These viruses spread quickly in birds, usually causing illness and death. Preventive killing of poultry (“culling”) is a common method of stopping the spread of these viruses.

How is the H5N1 avian flu virus affecting the poultry and wild birds around the world?

Since 1997, hundreds of millions of wild birds and poultry have died or been destroyed from the H5N1 avian flu virus. The H5N1 avian flu virus sickens or kills most of the birds that become infected, but some wild birds may carry the virus without becoming sick.

Is the H5N1 avian flu virus affecting people?

The current outbreaks of H5N1 virus began affecting people in Asia in 2003. To date, fewer than 200 people have been diagnosed with the H5N1 avian flu virus. People can catch the H5N1 avian flu virus from birds, so anywhere birds are affected, people are also at risk. This virus can cause severe flu symptoms including fever, sore throat, cough, pneumonia, muscle aches, and diarrhea. Most people catch the virus from direct contact with infected birds. About half of the affected people have died.

All of the human cases of this H5N1 avian flu have been overseas. If I am in the United States, do I have to worry?

The H5N1 avian flu virus is not present in the United States. In its current form, it does not pass easily from person to person. If the H5N1 avian flu virus changes (“mutates”) to pass easily from person to person, this could cause an influenza pandemic and potentially affect millions of people. See “Pandemic Flu” at: http://deploymenthealthlibrary.fhp.osd.mil/products/dhsd/PandemicFlu_120705.pdf. In a small number of cases, the H5N1 avian flu virus may have spread between family members or to healthcare workers through close contact.

What can I do to protect myself from infection with the H5N1 avian flu virus?

The H5N1 avian flu virus is not present in the United States, and does not pass easily from person to person. There are steps you can take to stop the spread of viruses in general, such as covering your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing and keeping your hands clean. The vaccine to protect people against the H5N1 avian flu virus is under development. It remains important for those in high-risk groups (the very young and old, and those with long-term illnesses) to get a seasonal flu shot to keep their immunity up.

How do health care providers tell the difference between the H5N1 avian flu and seasonal flu in people?

The seasonal flu and the H5N1 avian flu cause similar symptoms in people (fever, sore throat, cough, pneumonia, muscle aches, diarrhea). If you are normally a healthy person and you have severe flu symptoms, you should discuss your condition with your health care provider. If your health care provider suspects that you have avian flu, he or she can do further testing to determine what kind of flu virus is involved. The results of this test may take up to a week to reach your doctor.



Are servicemembers at a high risk of H5N1 avian flu virus infection?

People in close contact with poultry at farms and live bird markets in areas where the H5N1 virus is present are at a higher risk for infection. Servicemembers serving in such areas should use increased caution. There may be a slight risk from consuming undercooked poultry infected with the H5N1 avian flu virus. Proper cooking of poultry should kill the virus and prevent infection.

Since I am not in contact with live poultry, are there precautions I should take to further protect my family and myself?

Do not handle any sick bird or other animal. Pets and wild animals can carry a wide range of illnesses that may spread to people. You should use protective gloves if you must touch a sick bird. It is unlikely that a pet bird is infected with the H5N1 avian flu virus. Proper cooking of poultry will kill the H5N1 avian flu virus.

What is the Department of Defense doing to protect servicemembers from the H5N1 avian flu virus should it change ("mutate") to spread from person to person?

The H5N1 avian flu virus is not present in the United States, and does not pass easily from person to person. However, as a precaution our military commands are planning for the appropriate response to an outbreak of H5N1 avian flu in this country or near our installations overseas. The DoD will store anti-viral medications (Tamiflu and Relenza) and vaccines as they become available. There is also a DoD Global Influenza Surveillance Program, which provides worldwide surveillance of influenza threats.

Additional Resources:

- The Department of Defense Deployment Health Support Directorate has information on avian flu and other deployment health questions: 1-800-497-6261 http://www.deploymentlink.osd.mil/medical/medical_issue/immun/avian_flu.shtml
- The U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine avian and pandemic flu information page: <http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil/avianflu/default.aspx>
- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) avian flu public hotlines: Public 888-246-2675; Spanish 888-246-2857; and for Clinicians 877-246-4625. The CDC has additional online resources at: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/index.htm>.
- The World Health Organization has information on avian flu online at: http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/.
- Physicians, employers and employees should contact their state or local health department (<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/international/relres.html>) to notify them of any symptomatic employees or suspected exposure incidents.

