



Medicine for Managers

Dr Paul Lambden BSc MB BS BDS FDSRCS MRCS LRCP DRCOG MHSM

Avian Flu

Avian Flu, also known as Bird Flu, is a type of influenza that spreads among birds. Some strains of avian flu can pass between birds and people but to do so is extremely rare. It usually requires close and prolonged contact between a human and an infected bird for transmission to occur, so the risk to humans is categorised by the Department of Health as 'very low'.

It has been confirmed in early January that a person living in the South-West of England has contracted Avian Flu. The APHA (Animal and Plant Health Agency) identified an outbreak of the H5N1 strain of the virus in a flock of birds.

The infection was identified through routine monitoring conducted on anyone with close contact with the birds.

All the infected birds in this outbreak have been culled.

There is no evidence that the strain detected in the UK can spread from person to person. However, in common with all viruses, evolution and the development of mutations (variants) could occur and therefore careful monitoring by the authorities is in place.

Avian influenza is highly contagious in birds.

Notifications have been sent out to all owners of flocks of birds, together with advice that no-one should touch a sick or dead bird but to follow

the advice provided by DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs).

The UK Chief Veterinary Officer said that there are a growing number of cases on farms and amongst other flocks and scrupulous biosecurity measures are used to keep the birds safe.



Following humane culling, considerable care is taken to limit and, if possible, to eliminate the disease at the site through cleaning and disinfection of all premises.

Description

More than a dozen types of bird flu have been identified, including the four strains which have most

recently infected humans:

H5N1 (since 1997)

H7N9

H5N6

H5N8

Although rare, it can be serious and there have been cases around the world, a large number associated with death.

There is concern amongst Health Officials that a global outbreak could occur if the avian virus mutates into a form that transmits between humans more easily.

Signs and Symptoms

The characteristics of avian flu are similar in nature to those of other types of influenza.

- Fever
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Headache
- Lethargy and weakness
- Muscle pain
- Breathlessness.
- Sometimes nausea and vomiting

The symptoms tend to appear between two and seven days after infection.

Causes of Bird Flu

The virus occurs naturally in wildfowl.

It can spread to domestic poultry, such as turkeys, chickens, ducks and geese and is transmitted by contact with bird droppings or bedding, the mucous secretions from the mouth or eyes or through surfaces contaminated by their feathers.

Spreading the disease to the wider community often occurs as a result of the sale of infected birds in overcrowded and unsanitary markets, where infection can thrive.

The infection can be transmitted through undercooked food.

Poultry should be thoroughly cooked throughout and eggs cooked until both the yolk and the white is firm. Fully cooking prevents transmission of the disease.

The number of instances where avian flu is believed to have been transmitted between humans is extremely small and bird-to-human is the greatest risk.

Consequences of Bird Flu

Patients who acquire the virus may develop complications. Most common is pneumonia and respiratory failure, but also conjunctivitis and kidney and heart complications.

Avian flu kills more than half of the people who contract it but, overall, the number of fatalities is small because so few people actually acquire the disease.

The World Health Organisation has reported fewer than 500 deaths since 1997, whereas, of course, the seasonal influenza kills thousands of people across the world each year.

There is no vaccine available to treat bird flu in the UK.

Prevention of Infection

Anyone who finds themselves in the area of an outbreak should take precautions:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water (and hand sanitiser if available)
- Take especial care if handling raw poultry
- Avoid contact with live birds, particularly in animal or poultry markets or farms

paullambden@compuserve.com