



Health & Safety Alert # 33-1-06

Avian Influenza (Bird Flu)

The purpose of this Alert is to heighten the awareness of the field regarding the avian influenza (bird flu), provide general information regarding its potential and risk, and provide a link for more information.

What is the Avian Influenza?

The avian influenza is an infection caused by bird flu viruses. These flu viruses occur naturally among birds. Wild birds worldwide carry the viruses in their intestines but usually do not get sick from them; however, avian influenza is very contagious among birds and can make some domesticated birds, including chickens, ducks, and turkeys very sick and kill them.

What is the Implication of Avian Influenza to Human Health?

The two main risks for humans are the risk of direct infection when the virus passes from the infected bird to humans and if given enough opportunity, the virus will change into a form that is highly infectious for humans and spreads easily from person to person. Bird flu viruses do not usually infect humans but more than 140 cases of avian influenza (H5N1) virus has been reported in Asia. Unlike seasonal flu which usually causes mild respiratory symptoms, H5N1 infection may follow an unusually aggressive clinical course causing rapid deterioration and high fatality. Primary viral pneumonia and multi-organ failure have been common among people who have become ill with the H5N1 influenza.

Does the Current Seasons Flu Vaccine Protect Me?

No. The vaccine for 2005/2006 season does not provide protection against the avian influenza.

Influenza Pandemic Preparedness

What changes are needed for H5N1 or another avian influenza virus to cause a pandemic? Three conditions must be met for a pandemic to start: 1) a new influenza virus subtype must emerge; 2) it must infect humans and causes serious illness; and 3) it must spread easily and sustainedly (continue without interruption) among humans. The H5N1 virus in Asia and Europe meets the first two conditions; it is a new virus for humans and it has infected more than 100 humans, killing over half of them.

However, the third condition, the establishment of efficient and sustained human-to-human transmission of the virus has not occurred. For this to take place, the H5N1 virus would need to improve its transmissibility among humans.

The Center for Disease Control is working with the World Health Organization (WHO) and other scientific agencies to monitor locations of cases of the flu and the development and testing of vaccines to combat the H5N1 virus. For current information, visit the WHO website at http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/.

For questions or comments regarding the above Alert, please contact the MUI/Registry Unit at (614) 995-3810.