Avian Flu

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The Basics

Avian Flu or Bird Flu is caused by the highly virulent H5N1 strain of influenza virus. As of late 2005 more than 100 people, mostly in Southeast Asia, had contracted the disease from infected birds; about half have died. Although not yet known to be capable of person to person transmission, experts cite the following reasons to fear the potential for a global pandemic:

- The general public lacks immunity to the virus;
- Vaccines will take time to develop;
- Flu virus spreads easily through droplets in the air;
- Contagious individuals can unknowingly spread the virus for more than a week before symptoms appear;
- Spanish flu (another bird flu) of 1918-1919 killed over 50 million people worldwide;
- Global commercial air travel will help to quickly spread the virus around the world; and
- One scenario suggests the virus could attack hundreds of cities and towns simultaneously for six to eight weeks, hospitalize thousands, close schools and businesses and cripple public services.

In the early stages of an Avian Flu epidemic, the AFA-CWA Air Safety, Health and Security Department recommends that Flight Attendants adopt strategies similar to those for personal protection outlined in the SARS page on the AFA-CWA ASHSD website:

- Maximize airflow to the cabin to reduce risk of exposure to airborne viruses or bacteria by encouraging your airline and pilots to turn up air packs to "high" whenever possible;
- Observe good personal hygiene – wash hands frequently, particularly before eating;
- Wear a protective face mask and gloves; and
- Isolate passengers or crew presenting with symptoms, have them wear a mask if available, and provide them a toilet cordoned off for their exclusive use.

Additional information and recommendations are available from the CDC Guidelines and Recommendations: Interim Guidance for Airline Flight Crews and Persons Meeting Passengers Arriving from Areas with Avian Influenza.

References to News Articles

Knight Ridder Avian Flu
New York Times Avian Influenza (requires free registration)
Washington Post Focus on Bird Flu (requires free registration)
Yahoo Flu Health Center

More Information

Government
WHO: Avian influenza
WHO: Influenza pandemic threat: current situation
CDC: Avian Influenza (Bird Flu)
CDC: Interim Guidance for Airline Flight Crews and Persons Meeting Passengers Arriving from Areas with Avian Influenza

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Official government Web site for information on pandemic flu and avian influenza

Feb. 1, 2007 — WHO and OIE Revised Influenza Vaccine Development Guidance

Feb. 1, 2007 — Pandemic Flu Public Service Announcement Released

Feb. 1, 2007 — Pre-pandemic Planning for Community Mitigation Issued

U.S. Federal Aviation Administration: Safety Alert for Operators: Avian influenza (AKA, avian flu, bird flu) – current information for crewmembers

U.S. Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA): Guidance for Protecting Workers Against Avian Flu


National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH): Avian Influenza: Protecting Workers from Exposure includes an overview and description of the disease, and provides links to numerous national and international resources that discuss the topic.

Academia and Labor

Pandemic Influenza, from the AFL-CIO

The Lancet (requires registration for most articles)

Avian influenza from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Flu Wiki, a site created to “to help local communities prepare for and perhaps cope with a possible influenza pandemic.”

Influenza Pandemic – Informational Bulletin for Emergency Responders, International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF)

OHDEN, the Occupational Health Disaster Expert Network - Pandemic Influenza Information Site for Workplace and Workforce Planning

Avian Flu: What to Expect and How Companies Can Prepare for It – Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania

Selected Reports

DHHS Report on Pandemic Planning, 13 March 2006 — First report issued on pandemic planning in 5 key areas.

The Origins of Pandemic Influenza — Lessons from the 1918 Virus, by Robert B. Belshe, M.D., New England Journal of Medicine, 24 November, 2005. “The completion of the genetic sequencing of the 1918 influenza A virus by Taubenberger et al. and the subsequent recovery of the virus by Tumpey et al. using reverse genetic techniques are spectacular achievements of contemporary molecular biology and provide important insights into the origin of pandemic influenza…”

Avian Flu: What Should Be Done, by Tyler Cowen, George Mason University Mercatus Center, 11 November, 2005. “The current outbreak of H5N1 avian flu has been spreading to a variety of bird species, including ducks, chickens, magpies, crows, pigeons, and gulls. Today more birds have dangerous forms of avian flu than at any time in recorded history. H5N1 also has jumped to many species of mammals, including mice, tigers, cats and dogs. Recent events in Indonesia suggest the flu has mutated to jump from birds to humans with greater ease. Humans have picked up the flu—and died—simply from visiting birds in the zoo, most likely through pulverized feces in the air. As of early November, over sixty individuals have died of avian flu, all in Southeast Asia and mostly in Vietnam. The remaining question is whether the flu will evolve to allow for easy human-to-human transmission. Some family-based case clusters in Indonesia suggest that human-to-human transmission may be occurring, although not with great ease.”

Web Logs ("blogs")

Effect Measure is a “forum for progressive public health discussion and argument as well as a source of public health information from around the web...,” which includes numerous links to opinion and facts on avian flu.

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