

Avian (Bird) Influenza: Fact Sheet # 2

Information for Physicians and Health Care Workers

For most Canadians, the risk of getting avian influenza is low. However, anyone exposed to poultry or wild birds in an area where avian influenza type A (H5N1) has been detected is at some risk for infection.

What is avian influenza?

Avian influenza is a contagious viral infection that can affect all species of birds. Humans can sometimes also be infected by type A strains of avian influenza viruses.

Avian influenza type A (H5N1)

Avian influenza type A (H5N1) virus is of particular concern because one of its new Asian variants has shown that it:

- can mutate rapidly;
- can cause severe respiratory disease in humans; and
- could acquire genes from viruses infecting other species.

However, this new variant has not yet been reported in outside of Asia and Eastern Europe.

Clinical Features

Reports from earlier outbreaks indicate that the symptoms of avian influenza in humans ranged from typical flu-like symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, sore throat and muscle aches) to eye infections, pneumonia, acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), multiple organ failure, lymphopenia, elevated liver enzyme levels and abnormal clotting profiles.

The Public Health Agency of Canada recommends enhanced surveillance efforts by all hospitals, health centers and clinics. This is to identify patients who have unexplained pneumonia, ARDS or severe respiratory illness and who have traveled to an area where avian influenza type A (H5N1) has been detected within 10 days from the onset of symptoms.¹

Physicians are advised to isolate the patient, initiate droplet precautions and contact the Office of the Chief Medical Health Officer for further discussions if an epidemiological link is apparent.

For further information:

Contact the Office of The Chief Medical Health Officer at (867) 920-8877.

Visit the following websites:

www.hlthss.gov.nt.ca – NWT Department of Health and Social Services (See Programs & Services Section)

<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/h5n1/> – Public Health Agency of Canada

¹ <http://www.cmaj.ca/cgi/content/full/170/5/785#R3-24>