

Avian Flu Update

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Travel Health Alert - Avian Flu Update

Avian flu or the bird flu is a very infectious disease of birds caused by type A strains of the influenza virus. The disease has a global distribution with some birds more susceptible than others. Many serotypes are known to infect birds and migratory fowl are thought to be the natural reservoir. It appears they are the most resistant to natural infection. Domestic bird populations are seen as the most susceptible and given the nature of their housing it is understandable that any airborne illness will spread quickly within a population with devastating consequences.



Avian flu is now being reported in Indonesia with "millions" of birds currently infected. Other countries involved in the outbreak include Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Taiwan and Cambodia. In Vietnam the infection has been detected in 23 out of 61 provinces with almost 3 million birds either dying from the disease or destroyed. Not all outbreaks have been confirmed as due to the H5N1 influenza A strain of the virus but the likelihood is high. This is the same strain responsible for 18 cases and 6 deaths in Hong Kong in 1997. Only Vietnam and Thailand have reported confirmed human cases to date.

Avian influenza A viruses do not usually infect humans, however these viruses are extremely unstable and can change in structure. This is the concern for public health authorities at the current time. It is however not presently considered necessary to cancel international travel, especially for business purposes where contact with bird faeces and saliva would be expected to be minimal. Where humans live in close proximity to domestic poultry and animals such as the pig eg East Asia, there is always the possibility that a new strain of the virus with more human characteristics can evolve. However in the short term this is unlikely and a massive increase in human infections would herald such a change. Travellers are advised to avoid areas where there is a concentration of poultry and pigs. We can only reiterate that human to human transmission is highly unlikely.

According to WHO, when mutations do occur, Avian influenza is generally of low pathogenicity to humans (ie has a limited ability to inflict damage on the host). It can however become more virulent over time. In an outbreak in the USA in 1983/84 a highly pathogenic virus evolved over 6 months necessitating the destruction of 17 million birds. According to WHO the rapid culling of birds in infected regions is seen as the major means of limiting the outbreak and minimizing the opportunity for mutations to occur.

While we are aware of the nature of the respiratory implications of the virus ...what about food safety? According to WHO there is no evidence to suggest that any processed poultry products (whole refrigerated or frozen carcasses and products derived from them) and eggs in or arriving from areas currently experiencing outbreaks of avian influenza H5N1 in poultry flocks pose a risk to public health. Heightened screening processes are in operation at Australian airports to identify potentially infected poultry products and feathers. Any introduction of bird flu into Australian poultry flocks could have devastating consequences and all travellers should be aware of their responsibility in this matter.

Influenza viruses are killed by adequate heat. The importance of good hygiene practices during handling of poultry products, including hand washing, prevention of cross-contamination and thorough cooking (70°C) cannot be over emphasised in the current outbreak. Travellers are advised to pay close attention to the rules of eating and drinking safely. (http://www.traveldoctor.com.au/fs_d.asp)

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