

Date: March 1, 2007

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Avian Flu Information from a Family Physician

(COLUMBUS, Ohio)— Avian influenza, the bird flu, is a virus that infects wild birds (ducks, gulls and shorebirds) and domestic poultry (chickens, turkeys, ducks and geese). There is flu for birds just like there is for humans and, as with people, some forms of the flu are worse than others.

Avian influenza occurs naturally among birds, is very contagious and can make some domesticated birds including chickens, ducks and turkeys, very sick and kill them.

“At this point, I encourage my patients not to worry, despite the recent outbreak of avian flu at a British turkey farm. So far, there has not been any human to human transmission of avian flu,” said Clint Koenig, M.D., a family physician at Grant Medical Center in Columbus, Ohio.

Infected birds shed influenza virus in their saliva, nasal secretions and feces. Domesticated birds may become infected with the avian influenza virus through direct contact with infected waterfowl or other infected poultry, or through contact with surfaces (such as dirt or cages) or materials (such as water or feed) that have been contaminated with the virus.

During an outbreak of a highly contagious strain of the avian flu (H5N1) among poultry, there is a possible risk to people who have direct or close contact with H5N1-infected birds or surfaces that have been contaminated with secretions or excretions from H5N1-infected birds.

Currently, the H5N1 virus does not have the ability to pass easily from person to person, nor does it pass easily from birds to people. But there are precautions you should take in the event a bird in Ohio contracts H5N1 virus. Precautions you should normally take around birds, as they can carry other viruses and bacteria, are to practice safe food handling and preparation, and take steps to stay healthy.

Symptoms of avian influenza in humans have ranged from typical human flu-like symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, sore throat and muscle aches) to eye infections, pneumonia, severe respiratory diseases (such as acute respiratory distress) and other severe and life-threatening complications.

“There currently is not a vaccine for avian flu,” stated Koenig. “However, experimental research is being performed to determine vaccine effectiveness.” Research studies to test a vaccine to protect humans against H5N1 virus began in April 2005, and a series of clinical trials is under way.

For more information about avian flu, visit www.cdc.gov/flu/avian and www.pandemicflu.gov.

The Ohio Academy of Family Physicians is a statewide professional association with more than 4,600 members, including practicing physicians, family medicine residents and medical students. The scope of family medicine encompasses all ages, both sexes and every disease entity. Family physicians provide comprehensive, continuing care to all members of the family.

FACT SHEET

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Practice Safe Food Handling and Preparation

- Wash hands before and after handling food.
- Prevent cross-contamination by keeping raw meat, poultry, fish and their juices away from other foods.
- Wash hands, cutting board, knife and counter tops with hot, soapy water after cutting raw meats.
- Sanitize cutting boards by using a solution of one teaspoon chlorine bleach in one quart of water.
- Use a food thermometer to ensure food has reached proper temperatures.

Stay Healthy

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue away after you use it.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow or upper sleeve if you do not have a tissue.
- Try not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth; germs often spread this way.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze or use the restroom and before eating. If you are not near soap and water, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Stay away as much as you can from people who are sick.
- If you get ill, stay home from work or school.
- Eat a balanced diet that includes plenty of vegetables, fruits and whole grains.
- Drink plenty of water and go easy on salt, sugar, alcohol and saturated fat.
- Exercise on a regular basis. Thirty minutes or more of physical activity most days of the week can help boost your immunity.
- Get plenty of rest. Sleep is shown to help your body's ability to fight off illness.
- Avoid alcohol and tobacco use.

Sources: *World Health Organization*
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
U.S. Food and Drug Administration
www.ohiopandemicflu.gov