Avian Influenza, Information for Travelers
Questions and Answers

Avian Influenza or “Bird Flu” is also known as H5N1 virus. It occurs naturally in wild and domesticated birds. H5N1 is very contagious among birds and can be deadly to them. Birds that are infected with H5N1 virus can shed it in their saliva, nasal secretions and feces. Humans can become infected with avian influenza if they have contact with infected birds. However, it should be known the H5N1 virus does not easily infect humans. If a person is infected with the H5N1 virus, it is difficult for it to spread to another person.

The questions and answers in this document were adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Travelers can minimize health risks associated with bird flu by avoiding exposure to infected birds, getting prompt medical care if flu symptoms develop, and reading current information on bird flu.

DO BIRD FLU VIRUSES INFECT HUMANS?

Not usually, but cases of human infection with bird flu viruses have occurred since 1997. So far, spread of H5N1 virus from person to person has been rare. Since avian influenza does not commonly infect humans, there is very little immunity to the virus. Because all influenza viruses can mutate, scientists are concerned the H5N1 virus could change and make it easier for the virus to spread among humans. If the H5N1 virus were able to infect people and spread from person to person, an "influenza pandemic" could occur. Experts from around the world are watching the H5N1 virus and are preparing for the possibility of the virus spreading from person to person.

FLU SYMPTOMS

- Cough.
- Sore throat.
- Fever.
- Muscle aches.
- Nausea, vomiting.
- Diarrhea.
- Difficulty breathing.
- Pneumonia.
- Eye infections.

HOW DOES BIRD FLU SPREAD?

Infected birds shed the influenza virus in their saliva, nasal secretions, and feces. Birds become infected when they have contact with infected birds, contaminated excretions or contaminated surfaces. The virus can be spread from country to country through international poultry trade or migrating birds.

WHAT IS THE AVIAN INFLUENZA A (H5N1) VIRUS?

Avian influenza or H5N1, is an influenza A virus that occurs mainly in birds. Like all bird flu viruses, the H5N1 virus circulates among birds worldwide. It is very contagious and has a high death rate among the bird population.

WHERE HAS THE H5N1 VIRUS BEEN FOUND?

Outbreaks of bird flu have been reported in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam). H5N1 has also been isolated from birds in Russia.

WHAT IS THE RISK TO HUMANS FROM BIRD FLU?

The risk of bird flu is low to most people because the virus occurs mainly in birds. Most H5N1 infections in humans have occurred following direct contact with infected poultry (domesticated chickens, ducks, turkeys) or surfaces contaminated with the H5N1 virus. Even though humans have been infected with the virus, death rates

have been low. Travelers should avoid contact with infected birds or contaminated surfaces. Care should be taken when handling and cooking poultry.

CAN I GET BIRD FLU FROM EATING OR PREPARING EGGS OR POULTRY?

People cannot get bird flu when eating properly handled and cooked poultry or eggs. Even if poultry or eggs are infected with the H5N1 virus, proper cooking will kill it. To stay safe while cooking poultry:

- After handling raw poultry, wash your hands for 20 seconds with warm water and soap.
- While preparing a meal, keep cutting boards and utensils that have come into contact with raw poultry away from other foods.
- Clean cutting boards and utensils with hot water and soap after they have come into contact with raw poultry.
- Clean all surfaces that may have come into contact with raw poultry.
- Cook eggs until the whites and yolks are firm.
- Use a food thermometer to make sure poultry is cooked properly.

HOW IS INFECTION WITH H5N1 VIRUS IN HUMANS TREATED?

Oseltamivir and zanamivir are two antiviral medications that may help treat H5N1 virus.

IS THERE A VACCINE TO PROTECT HUMANS FROM H5N1 VIRUS?

Vaccine development for H5N1 virus is underway. The “normal” flu vaccine available each year will not protect you from the H5N1 virus. Consult your health care provider for vaccine information.

HOW CAN I AVOID EXPOSURE TO THE H5N1 VIRUS?

The Centers for Disease Control(CDC) advises people traveling to countries with known outbreaks of bird flu to avoid poultry farms, contact with animals in food markets, and surfaces that may be contaminated with feces from poultry or other animals. If people travel to countries with known bird flu infections, it is possible to become infected with the H5N1 virus.

HOW CAN I GET MEDICAL CARE WHILE TRAVELING OVERSEAS?

Travelers are advised to talk with their healthcare provider before traveling to foreign countries. Keep a list of prescription medicines and a current medical history. If you take prescription medicine, carry a sufficient supply. It is also advised to have your medical history written in the language of the country you visit. Travelers should contact their healthcare insurance provider to determine insurance coverage outside their country of origin.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I DEVELOP FLU SYMPTOMS AFTER RETURNING FROM OVERSEAS?

As with any illness, you should promptly seek appropriate medical care. Tell your health care provider when and where you have traveled. Mention any disease outbreaks in the countries you visited.

This information is courtesy of the CDC.

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