

Avian Influenza (Bird Flu)

There are many types of influenza viruses that usually only infect birds; these are called avian influenza viruses. Some avian influenza viruses, such as H5N1 or H7N9, have been associated with human disease. Some avian influenza viruses circulate in wild bird populations causing no disease or only mild disease. Infection of domestic poultry, such as chickens, can cause severe disease. In 2003, H5N1 was identified in Hong Kong and rapidly spread to other countries in Asia and later to some areas of the Middle East, Europe and Africa. In Australia, there have been no reports of H5N1 avian influenza in birds and there have been no known human cases of H5N1 influenza. Authorities are particularly concerned about the possibility that the H5N1 avian influenza virus may mutate into a strain that can spread more easily from person to person. This situation is being closely monitored by animal and human health authorities.

There is no evidence of sustained person to person spread of H5N1 avian influenza. People travelling overseas to avian influenza affected countries are currently only at risk of contracting bird flu if they have close contact with infected birds or raw poultry products.

The virus is found in bird faeces and respiratory secretions and does not easily spread from birds to humans. The risk of contracting the disease from occasional contact with an infected bird, such as when travelling on public transport, is extremely low.

Signs and Symptoms:

The usual symptoms of avian influenza are similar to those of other forms of influenza, such as high fever, cough, fatigue and aching muscles. Runny nose and sneezing are occasionally present and diarrhoea, vomiting and abdominal pain may also occasionally occur.

Treatment:

Antiviral medications such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza) can be used in the treatment of avian influenza. Antibiotics may be required for secondary bacterial infections such as pneumonia.

Prevention:

Travellers to countries where avian influenza is present should:

- avoid situations where they may come into close contact with birds, such as poultry farms and live bird markets;
- avoid raw chicken, eggs, and other poultry products. If it is necessary to handle or cook poultry and eggs, ensure they are handled hygienically with careful attention to hand washing after handling, and thorough cooking, as this destroys the virus; and
- wash hands regularly and more frequently than usual.

Travellers should check the [Australian Government travel advisory \(http://smartraveller.gov.au/guide/all-travellers/health/infectious-diseases.html\)](http://smartraveller.gov.au/guide/all-travellers/health/infectious-diseases.html) for the country they are visiting to determine if the country is avian influenza affected. [Australian Government travel advice on avian influenza \(http://smartraveller.gov.au/guide/all-travellers/health/infectious-diseases.html\)](http://smartraveller.gov.au/guide/all-travellers/health/infectious-diseases.html).

While some preliminary development work has been done, no human vaccine is currently available for avian influenza. The ordinary influenza vaccine does not protect against avian influenza. However annual influenza vaccination is recommended for any person >6 months of age who wishes to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with influenza. Further information on influenza vaccine can be obtained from the [Queensland Health fact sheet on influenza \(http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthConditions/2/Infections-Parasites/41/Viral-Infections/723/Influenza-The-Flu\)](http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthConditions/2/Infections-Parasites/41/Viral-Infections/723/Influenza-The-Flu)

Antiviral medications such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza) may be protective in reducing the symptoms of avian influenza. These medications are available on prescription only. It is not currently recommended that travellers to countries affected by avian influenza obtain supplies of antiviral medications. People who reside in an avian influenza affected area for an extended period may wish to consider, as a precautionary measure, having access to supplies of antiviral medication for treatment if required. Long term residents are at a greater risk of exposure to avian influenza over time.

Medical advice should be sought before antiviral medications are commenced.

Health outcome:

Pneumonia is a very common complication of avian influenza. Over half of the confirmed cases of avian influenza in humans have died, mainly from lung or other organ failure.

Other resources:

[Australian Government Travel Advisory Service](http://smartraveller.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx) (<http://smartraveller.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>)

[WHO avian influenza site](http://www.who.int/influenza/human_animal_interface/en/) (http://www.who.int/influenza/human_animal_interface/en/)

Department of Health and Ageing: frequently asked questions on [Avian influenza \(Bird Flu\)](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-avian_influenza-index.htm) (http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-avian_influenza-index.htm) and [Pandemic influenza](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-pandemic-influenza.htm) (<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-pandemic-influenza.htm>)

Related content

[Queensland Health influenza fact sheet](http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/217/82/Influenza-The-Flu)
(<http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/217/82/Influenza-The-Flu>)

Help and assistance:

For more information:

- see your local doctor
- contact the nearest [public health unit](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/system-governance/contact-us/contact/public-health-units) (<https://www.health.qld.gov.au/system-governance/contact-us/contact/public-health-units>)
- [call 13 HEALTH \(13 43 25 84\)](https://www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health/index.html) (<https://www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health/index.html>) to get qualified health advice 24/7 for the cost of a local call.

If you are in an emergency situation, call 000

The Federal Government also has a telephone information hotline 1800 004 599, currently staffed 8:00 am to 6:00 pm Monday to Friday.