

Avian Influenza

What is avian influenza?

There are many types of influenza viruses that usually only infect birds; these are called avian influenza viruses. Very rarely, an avian influenza virus can also infect people. The current avian influenza virus subtype, called H5N1, can infect both birds and people. People have caught avian influenza from having close contact with avian influenza-infected birds, their excretions, or their environment. Avian influenza causes severe flu-like symptoms in people and may result in death. Transmission of avian influenza from one person to another is extremely rare.

What measures are in place to prevent avian influenza in Australia?

To date, there have been no reports of avian influenza in birds or people in Australia and the Australian Government has many measures in place to prevent the emergence of avian influenza in Australia. It is very unlikely that anyone entering Australia with avian influenza will pass the disease to another person. But people who have arrived from overseas or travelled to countries where there are reports of avian influenza in birds or people should monitor their health carefully for seven (7) days (for other severe respiratory diseases this period of monitoring may be longer). They should immediately contact a doctor if they feel unwell with fever or flu-like symptoms and they should inform the doctor about their travels.

Why are health authorities worried about avian influenza?

The World Health Organization is worried that an avian influenza virus and a human influenza virus might mix and result in a new strain of influenza virus that can be easily passed from person to person. This might trigger an "influenza pandemic", where the disease spreads rapidly around the world, infecting many people.

What are the symptoms? How soon do symptoms start? How long does it last?

The exact symptoms, incubation period and duration of avian influenza in people is not known, because there have not been enough cases. The most common symptoms for people infected with the avian influenza virus are similar to those for people infected with human influenza virus, although the severity of the illness may differ. Symptoms generally appear three to seven days after exposure and can last up to seven days. People with avian influenza are infectious for at least seven (7) days (children are infectious for up to 21 days).

Do you need more information?

Visit the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing web site: www.health.gov.au Call the Department of Health and Ageing Information Hotline 1800 004 599 (8:30 am to 5pm Monday to Friday, recorded message at all other times).

