

AVIAN FLU

Just like you and me, chickens get the flu too, and yearly there are outbreaks in farms all over the world that cause illness in birds. Usually, the type of influenza birds contract is a distinct type of flu that does not generally affect other species, called avian influenza. In 2003 there was a minor bird flu outbreak in the Netherlands, leading to the loss of _ of all Dutch poultry at a cost of millions of euros.



Unfortunately now and then, this kind of bird virus becomes very strong, starts killing masses of birds, and then crosses species and infects other animals and humans. Such an outbreak has occurred over the past 2 years, with the majority of human cases occurring in Indochina, leading to over 40 human deaths in Vietnam, 12 in Thailand, and 4 in Cambodia in previously healthy people as of October 2005. Recently there has been 9 cases in our Northern neighbour Indonesia, leading to more fears about it causing disease in travellers or it reaching Australia.

How do I catch the bird flu?



Avian influenza has mostly been contracted in this current outbreak by directly inhaling the virus from unwell poultry. Inhaling their respiratory secretions or possibly their faeces are the ways in which infections are thought likely to occur. There have been 2 cases in Vietnam where the transmission involved people drinking uncooked duck blood (avoid this where possible!). Otherwise all the deaths in Asia have occurred in farmers and villagers or other people directly involved in the care of poultry. This year's bird flu strain does **not** currently have the ability to be transmitted from human to human. The future concern is that it may mutate into a form that can be transmissible by humans, but for the time being this has not occurred. It can only be passed to a human from a sick bird. The World Health Organisation, (and the Travel Medicine Centre!), recommend simply that travellers avoid poultry farms and live animal markets.

Can I eat chickens and eggs?

Scientists have shown that the bird flu virus can exist in uncooked poultry and eggs. As soon as the chicken or the egg has been heated to 80 Degrees Celsius the virus is killed, so normal cooking processes will get rid of avian influenza particles in meat or eggs. Now that the current outbreak has been widely publicised to all governments in the area, they have been busy culling all poultry flocks which have contracted the virus. The birds should be burnt and buried, and are not used for consumption, so any meat or eggs that you purchase should already be disease free. In the event you are given a village chicken, or if you are concerned that the culling process is not foolproof, simply ensuring your chicken or eggs are cooked all the way through will prevent you from coming into contact with the virus. It is also important to wash your hands thoroughly and regularly, and especially after preparing any raw poultry for consumption.

Is there a vaccine? How do I prevent catching the chicken flu?

The regular human flu shot unfortunately does not protect people from chicken flu, and bird flu vaccines are currently being developed to be given to farmers and others at risk (including the birds!). It is extremely unlikely that a tourist will need this vaccine. We offer the human flu shot to travellers as this is prevalent all year in Asia, and then should a traveller come down with a fever and have had exposure to birds, they know they should seek medical attention immediately.

There are antiviral drugs (tamiflu, relenza) which can treat avian influenza if given to animals (and theoretically to people) within 48 hours of symptoms occurring, and the government is stockpiling this for the sake of local Aussies should the flu mutate and hit our shores. If a traveller is highly anxious or working with birds, they can have an emergency packet of this in case they come down with a fever; but as there are other serious causes of a fever while travelling such as malaria, it is recommended that anyone with symptoms seek immediate medical attention to clarify the diagnosis, isolate themselves from others, and get the appropriate treatment.

So as long as you aren't sleeping next to coughing chickens and that you make sure your eggs and chicken are cooked all the way through, you can get out in Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and the rest of Asia and tuck into chicken satays, chicken curries, bacon and eggs for brekkie, and even Kentucky Fried Chicken if you are missing home.