

Independent Guide

What do I need to know about Bird Flu or "Avian Influenza"?



Independent workplace compliance

What is Bird Flu?

Bird Flu is contagious diseases of animals caused by viruses that normally only infect birds and, less commonly, pigs. Avian influenza viruses are very specific to bird species but have, on rare occasions, crossed the species barrier to infect humans.

What are the implications for human health?

The first is the risk of direct infection when viruses pass from poultry to humans, resulting in a very severe disease and, in some cases, death. Unlike normal seasonal influenza, where infection causes milder respiratory symptoms in most people, the viruses associated with Bird Flu unusually aggressive with a much higher fatality rate. In current outbreaks more than half of those infected with the virus have died (most cases having occurred in previously healthy children and young adults). The second, and far greater, risk is that given enough opportunities, the virus will change its form and instead of being rarely infectious in humans, will gain the ability to spread from person to person easily. Such a change could mark the start of a global outbreak (pandemic).

How do people become infected?

People become infected either by direct contact with infected poultry or surfaces and objects contaminated by their faeces.

Is it safe to eat poultry?

As always, provided the poultry remains disease-free and proper food safety practices and cooking are undertaken, no problems should arise from either the poultry or associated products such as eggs.

What is the risk of a pandemic?

For a pandemic to occur three criteria need to be met.

- A new influenza sub-type would need to emerge.
- It would need to be able to infect people, causing serious illness.
- It would need to be able to spread easily from person to person.

What are the most important warning signals that a pandemic is about to start?

The most important warning signal will come when clusters of patients with clinical symptoms of influenza occur, closely related in time and place, which clearly suggest that there has been human to human transmission. This usually means that it will be the health care workers looking after those infected in the first wave that become infected, and thus suggest that human to human transmission is occurring.

Are there drugs available for treatment?

Currently, two drugs are available that are believed to reduce the severity and duration of the illness, provided that they are administered within 48 hours of the symptoms first occurring. These are known as tamiflu and relenza. The UK government usually has a stock of anti-viral drugs against the contingency of a Bird Flu pandemic. There are potential vaccines for protecting humans against infection from Bird Flu and these are at various stages of testing and production.

What can I do to reduce the risks personally?

If a pandemic does occur, you can reduce the risks of catching or spreading influenza, including Bird Flu, by adhering to the following:

- When you sneeze or cough make sure that, if possible, you cover both your nose and mouth with a good quality tissue, and make sure that these tissues are then promptly and carefully placed in a bag before binning them.
- Wherever possible, avoid non-essential travel and contact with large crowds.
- Focus on maintaining good basic hygiene, for example washing your hands frequently with soap and water, to reduce the spread of the virus from your hands to your face, surfaces or other people (this means lathering the hands with the soap for at least 20 seconds before rinsing off).
- Make sure that any hard surfaces that people touch which may be contaminated, such as kitchen worktops, door handles, lift buttons, tap handles etc. are frequently and properly cleaned, using normal cleaning products and disinfectant.



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- Make sure that your children also follow the above advice. If you do catch flu, and the main symptoms of Bird Flu in humans are respiratory problems, fever, muscle aches, chest pains, eye symptoms and headache: Stay at home and rest.
- Take medicine such as aspirin, ibuprofen or paracetamol to relieve the symptoms (following the instructions with the medicines). (Please note that children under 16 must not be given aspirin or ready-made flu remedies containing aspirin.)
- Drink plenty of fluids. The Department of Health has stated that in the event of a flu pandemic, including Bird Flu, more information will be made available to the public through leaflets, websites and the media.

At present, there have been no cases of confirmed Bird Flu in the UK in humans.

This guide is of a general nature; specific advice can be obtained from Assurity Consulting. Assurity Consulting is the UK's leading independent compliance consultancy specialising in workplace health, safety and environmental solutions. We have over 30 years' experience of helping customers of all sizes, from across all sectors, manage their compliance responsibilities, making sure that their organisation is compliant, their employees are safe, their processes are cost effective and their management team is in control.



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