



Avian Flu Preparations

As health officials around the world express concern over the possibility of a widespread outbreak of avian influenza, U.S. healthcare providers and government leaders are preparing for such an event and offering educational materials that could be important should the virus begin to spread more easily and widely from person to person.



About Avian Flu

Avian influenza is an infection caused by avian (bird) influenza (flu) viruses. These influenza viruses occur naturally among birds. The risk from avian influenza is generally low to most people, because the viruses do not usually infect humans. However, confirmed cases of human infection from several subtypes of avian influenza infection have been reported since 1997. Most cases of avian influenza infection in humans have resulted from contact with infected poultry (e.g., domesticated chicken, ducks, and turkeys) or surfaces contaminated with secretion/excretions from infected birds.

Symptoms of avian influenza in humans have ranged from typical human influenza-like symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches) to eye infections, pneumonia, severe respiratory diseases (such as acute respiratory distress), and other severe and life-threatening complications. The symptoms may depend on which virus caused the infection. Because these viruses do not commonly infect humans, there is little or no immune protection against them in the human population. If the virus gained the capacity to spread easily from person to person, an influenza pandemic (worldwide outbreak of disease) could begin.

Studies suggest that some of the prescription medicines approved in the United States for human influenza viruses should work in treating avian influenza infection in humans. Additional studies are needed to demonstrate the effectiveness of these medicines.

Planning for Pandemic

In the event of a pandemic, preventive and therapeutic measures such as vaccines and antiviral agents, and antibiotics for treating secondary infections, could be in short supply. Medical facilities could be overburdened. A higher risk of exposure and illness of first responders might affect care of victims. Communications could be overwhelmed. In light of the potentially catastrophic effects of a pandemic, U.S. officials are focusing on preparing for the worst.

The media reports that development of a new vaccine specific to a human flu strain, stockpiling vaccines, quarantining infected individuals, minimizing human contact, liberal leave policies, and even bringing in the National Guard are some of the 300 recommendations included in the May 2006 "National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza" implementation plan that both government and non-government agencies are being asked to consider by the Bush Administration.

States like Florida, with high levels of international travel and frequent visits from cruise ships, could be among the first areas of the U.S. to face a widespread outbreak. The federal government has allocated \$4.6-million for Florida to start preparations.

Tips for Travelers

Public health experts offer the following tips for any international travel to an area affected by avian influenza:

- Be sure you are up to date with all your routine vaccinations, and see your doctor or health-care provider, ideally 4-6 weeks before travel, to get any additional vaccination medications or information needed.

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About 40% of Malpractice Suits Are Groundless, Study Concludes

About 40% of the medical malpractice cases filed in the U.S. are groundless, according to a Harvard analysis of the hotly debated issue that pits trial lawyers against doctors, with lawmakers in the middle.

Many of the lawsuits analyzed contained no evidence that a medical error was committed or that the patient suffered any injury, the researchers reported.

The vast majority of those dubious cases were dismissed with no payout to the patient. However, groundless lawsuits still accounted for 15% of the money paid out in settlements or verdicts.

The study's lead researcher, David Studdert of the Harvard School of Public Health, said the findings challenge the view among tort reform supporters that the legal system is riddled with frivolous claims that lead to exorbitant payouts.

"We found the system did reasonably well in sorting the good claims from the bad ones, but there were problems," he said.

However, the American Medical Association, which favors caps on malpractice awards, called the study proof that a substantial number of merit-less claims continue to slip through the cracks, "clogging the courts" and forcing doctors to waste time defending them, association board member Dr. Cecil Wilson said in a statement.

The findings were published in Thursday's *New England Journal of Medicine*.

The study found 3% of claims analyzed were filed by patients who had no injury. Of the claims that involved injuries, two-thirds were caused by medical error. But the remaining injury claims, or 37%, lacked evidence of a medical mistake, and most of those -- 72% -- were thrown out or otherwise resolved without a payout to the patient.

Altogether, the Harvard researchers reviewed 1,452 malpractice claims randomly selected from five insurance companies. The cases were resolved -- meaning they ended in a verdict, a settlement or a dismissal -- between 1984 and 2004. The claims resulted in a combined \$449 million in verdicts and settlements.

Source: Associated Press

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- Assemble a travel health kit containing basic first aid and medical supplies. Be sure to include a thermometer and alcohol-based hand gel for hand hygiene.
- Identify in-country health-care resources in advance of your trip.
- Check your health insurance plan or get additional insurance that covers medical evacuation in case you become sick.
- Avoid all direct contact with poultry, including touching well-appearing, sick, or dead chickens and ducks. Avoid places such as poultry farms and bird markets where live poultry are raised or kept, and avoid handling surfaces contaminated with poultry feces or secretions.
- As with other infectious illnesses, one of the most important preventive practices is careful and frequent hand washing. Cleaning your hands often with soap and water removes potentially infectious material from your skin and helps prevent disease transmission. Waterless alcohol-based hand gels may be used when soap is not available and hands are not visibly soiled.
- All foods from poultry, including eggs and poultry blood should be cooked thoroughly. Egg yolks should not be runny or liquid. Because influenza viruses are destroyed by heat, the cooking temperature for poultry meat should be 74°C (165°F)
- After your return, monitor your health for 10 days.
- Do not travel while ill, unless you are seeking medical care. Limiting contact with others as much as possible can help prevent the spread of an infectious illness.

For more information World Health Organization avian influenza website at http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/.

Sources: www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/index.htm, *The New York Times*, *St. Petersburg Times*, *Berkeley Daily Planet*