

Bird Flu and Pandemic Flu Frequently Asked Questions

Escambia County Health Department
DRAFT of May 10, 2006

For More Info go to www.PandemicFlu.gov

What is avian influenza – or “bird flu”?

Avian influenza - commonly called "bird flu" - is an infection caused by influenza viruses that occur naturally in birds. One strain of bird flu – the H5N1 virus -- has recently killed birds in a number of countries and some humans who were in close contact with those infected poultry were infected. At this time, there is no H5N1 bird flu in the United States and the U.S. government is watching closely to make sure we detect H5N1 bird flu if it were to arrive in the United States.

What is a pandemic? Could bird flu become the next pandemic?

A pandemic is a worldwide outbreak of disease in humans – there is not an influenza pandemic in the world at this time. There have been three influenza pandemics since 1918 that affected the United States. Scientists tell us that a pandemic occurs every 30-40 years and there has not been a pandemic in more than 35 years. An influenza pandemic happens when a new influenza virus emerges, most people have little or no immunity, and there is no vaccine for the virus. In a pandemic situation, the disease spreads easily person-to-person, causes serious illness, and can sweep across the country and around the world in very short time. Studies confirm that the bird flu virus H5N1 is able to mutate rapidly. If H5N1 adapts to allow easy human-to-human transmission, a pandemic could ensue – although this has not happened at this point.

How would a pandemic impact this community?

An especially severe influenza pandemic could lead to high levels of illness, death, social disruption, and economic loss. Everyday life would be disrupted because so many people in so many places become seriously ill at the same time. Impacts can range from school and business closings to the interruption of basic services such as public transportation and food delivery. The federal government estimates that 25-30% of people living in the United States would be affected by a pandemic.

Is there a vaccine for bird flu that will protect humans?

There currently is no commercially-available vaccine to protect humans against H5N1 virus that is being seen in Asia, Europe, and Africa. A pandemic vaccine cannot be produced until a new pandemic influenza virus emerges and is identified. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is addressing the problem in a number of ways -- developing pre-pandemic vaccines based on current lethal strains of H5N1, collaborating with industry to increase the Nation's vaccine production capacity, and seeking ways to expand or extend the existing supply.

How is Escambia County preparing for a pandemic?

Your health department, government, hospitals and businesses are taking the threat of a pandemic very seriously and began planning months ago. The effects of a pandemic can be lessened by these advance preparations. The focus of the health department's work is educating the public about pandemic and the current status of bird flu, preparing to make every effort to contain the infection using public health measures such as contact tracing and isolation, planning on how to maintain essential services if an outbreak should occur, and providing other government agencies and businesses with the tools they need to prepare effectively.

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Can I prepare for a pandemic?

Yes, there are several steps that individuals, families and communities can take to prepare:

- (1) Practice good public health measures like frequent hand washing and staying home when you are sick. Keep your immunizations up to date, including tetanus and, for those at risk, the pneumonia shot, which would decrease the risk of complications from any influenza infection.
- (2) Just as you do for hurricane season, you can keep a supply of non-perishable food and your prescription medication on hand in case you have to stay home as protection from the virus.
- (3) Begin staying informed through the local news media and websites like www.PandemicFlu.gov and BeReadyEscambia.com – both local news media and websites will be the first place to get information on protecting yourself if a pandemic impacts Escambia County.

There is a checklist for family preparedness at www.PandemicFlu.gov. If you are a business owner, there are also checklists for business preparedness at www.PandemicFlu.gov.

With concerns about bird flu, is it safe to eat chicken and duck in the United States?

Yes, it is safe to eat properly cooked poultry in the United States. The United States bans imports of poultry from areas with bird flu. The H5N1 bird flu virus has not been found in the United States. Cooking destroys germs, including the bird flu virus.

What do I do if I see a dead bird?

If you see a dead bird, do not touch it with your bare hands. Put on gloves and then place the bird into two plastic bags – this is called “double-bagging” – before you throw it in the trash. To report dead birds, you should contact the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission through their on-line reporting form at www.MyFWC.com/bird. Their contact number in Tallahassee is (850) 488-4676.

If I have chickens or live near a poultry farm, what should I do?

Remember, the deadly H5N1 bird flu virus is not in the United States at this point so there is no reason to be alarmed about living near chickens or a poultry farm. Information about protecting chickens from bird flu is available through the Florida Department of Agriculture at www.doacs.state.fl.us. Information about wild birds is available through the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission at www.MyFWC.com.

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and pandemic preparedness, go to www.PandemicFlu.gov.**