

Health Information – Communicable Diseases

Avian influenza

What is avian influenza?

Avian influenza (also known as bird flu) is caused by those influenza viruses that mainly affect birds and poultry, such as chickens or ducks. These viruses do not usually infect humans. However, human cases (mainly due to influenza A H5N1 and H9N2 viruses) have been reported in Hong Kong and other parts of the world.

How does it present?

Avian influenza in humans can cause eye infection, flu-like symptoms (e.g. fever, cough, sore throat, muscle pain) or chest infection. The more severe types (e.g. infection by H5N1 viruses) can cause serious diseases and even death.

How does it spread?

People mainly become infected with avian influenza through close contact with infected birds and poultry (live or dead) or their droppings.

How to treat human avian influenza?

Infected person should get enough rest and drink a lot of fluid. Patients with flu-like symptoms should see a doctor, especially for those with weakened body resistance or when their condition becomes worse e.g. high fever not coming down or shortness of breath.

Avian influenza H5N1 is generally more severe than a common flu, and most patients need hospital care. Some anti-viral drugs may help in treating the infection but should be used carefully following doctor's instructions. Unless there is bacterial infection, antibiotics are not necessary. Aspirin should not be used in children.

How to prevent it?

Infected birds and poultry (live or dead) or their droppings may carry avian influenza virus. Hence, we should:

- Avoid touching birds and poultry (live or dead) or their droppings.
- If you have touched them, wash hands thoroughly with liquid soap at once.
- Cook poultry and egg product thoroughly before eating.
- When travelling outside Hong Kong, avoid touching birds or poultry. Travellers returning from affected areas should see a doctor as soon as possible if they have flu-like symptoms. Tell the doctor of your travel history and wear a mask to prevent the spread of the disease.

Observe hygiene at all times:

- Keep hands clean, wash hands frequently with liquid soap, especially before eating or touching the nose, mouth or eyes.
- Cover your coughs or sneezes with tissue paper. Dispose of the soiled tissues properly into a rubbish bin with lid, and then wash hands thoroughly.
- Stay at home and avoid going to crowded places with poor air flow if flu-like symptoms develop.

At present, there is no effective vaccine to prevent avian influenza in human. Good body resistance helps prevent infections (including influenza). This can be achieved through a balanced diet, regular exercise, adequate rest, reducing stress and not smoking.

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