

Health risks and prevention of

**seasonal
influenza**

**avian
influenza**

**influenza
pandemic**



Centre for Health Protection



Department of Health

Seasonal Influenza

Health risk

Seasonal influenza is an acute illness of the respiratory tract caused by influenza viruses. It is usually more common in periods from January to March/April and from July to August in Hong Kong.

For healthy individuals, seasonal influenza is usually self-limiting with recovery in 2 - 7 days. However, it can be a serious illness to the weak and frail or elderly people, and may be complicated by bronchitis, chest infection or even death.

Measures to take

Seasonal Influenza Vaccination (SIV) is one of the effective means in preventing influenza and its complications together with reduction in influenza-associated hospitalisation and death. Given that the SIV offers protection against influenza and its complications, all members of the public, except those with known contraindications, should receive SIV annually for personal protection. Usually, it is suggested that vaccination should be received in autumn every year. About 2 weeks after vaccination, the body will develop a sufficient level of antibodies to protect against influenza virus infection.

Other preventive measures of seasonal influenza include observe good personal and environmental hygiene; perform hand hygiene frequently with liquid soap and water; maintain good indoor ventilation; avoid going to crowded or poorly ventilated public places; high-risk individuals may consider putting on surgical masks while in such places.

Members of the public should put on a surgical mask when having respiratory symptoms, such as fever, cough, runny nose, sore throat, headache, fatigue and muscle pain and should have adequate rest, drink plenty of water, refrain from work or school, seek medical advice if symptoms persist or deteriorate.

In addition, members of the public should also maintain a balanced diet, exercise regularly, take adequate rest, reduce stress, do not smoke and avoid alcohol consumption.

Avian Influenza

Health risk

Avian influenza (AI) is caused by those influenza viruses that mainly affect birds and poultry, such as chickens or ducks. Human cases infected with avian influenza A (e.g. H3N8, H5N1, H5N6, H7N9, H9N2, H10N3 and H10N5) viruses have been identified in recent years. Since those viruses do not commonly infect humans, there is little or no immune protection against them in the human population. People mainly become infected with AI through contact with infected birds and poultry (live or dead) or their droppings, or contact with contaminated environments (such as wet markets and live poultry markets). Human-to-human transmission is inefficient. Outbreaks of avian influenza in poultry have been reported in some countries from time to time, and some cases of human infection have occasionally been reported. People in close contact with live poultry are more susceptible to contracting AI. The elderly, children and people with chronic illness have a higher risk of developing complications such as bronchitis and chest infection. Illness in humans from avian influenza virus infections have ranged in severity from no symptoms or mild, flu-like symptoms (e.g. fever, cough, sore throat, muscle aches) to severe respiratory disease (e.g. chest infection) that resulted in multi-organ failure and even death. Eye infection (conjunctivitis), gastrointestinal symptoms (e.g. nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea) and neurological symptoms (e.g. seizures) have also been reported.

Measures to take

There is no registered vaccine for use in humans specific for avian influenza in Hong Kong. Whether a doctor prescribes antiviral drugs (e.g. Tamiflu) to a patient will depend on the circumstances and health needs of the patient. To prevent contracting AI in humans, members of the public should observe good personal and environmental hygiene; avoid touching poultry, birds, animals or their droppings; cook poultry and eggs thoroughly before eating.

Advice to travellers

When travelling to affected areas, avoid touching birds, poultry or their droppings and visiting wet markets, live poultry markets or farms. Eggs and poultry can be eaten only if thoroughly cooked. Travellers if feeling unwell when outside Hong Kong, especially if having a fever or cough, should wear a surgical mask and inform the hotel staff or tour leader and seek medical advice at once. Travellers returning from affected areas with AI outbreaks should consult doctors promptly if they have flu-like symptoms, and inform the doctor of the travel history and wear a surgical mask to help prevent spread of the disease.

Influenza Pandemic

Health risk

Influenza pandemic occurred roughly every 10 to 50 years in the past, and may strike anytime. It is caused by emergence and global spread of a novel influenza virus originated from an animal influenza virus undergoing major genetic changes resulting in efficient human-to-human transmission. The human population has little or no immunity against the emerging pandemic influenza virus. This could occur with avian influenza or other types of novel influenza virus. Influenza pandemic is usually associated with a greater number of cases, higher severity of illness, a higher death toll and consequently greater social and economic disruption.

Measures to take

When a pandemic strikes, it may not be possible to totally eliminate the risk of infection, but one can reduce the risk by stepping up good personal hygiene practices; avoiding crowded places; wearing a surgical mask if developing fever or respiratory symptoms, Visiting or working in high risk places such as residential care homes for the elderly, residential care homes for persons with disabilities, and clinical areas of healthcare facilities, high risk persons who are going to crowded places, public should also wear a surgical mask when taking public transportations or staying at crowded places Refraining from work or school when having respiratory symptoms. Pay attention to and comply with the guidelines issued by the Government in respect of travelling, port health control and suspension of public events, etc. Government will make timely announcements and give more specific advice to the public on measures to take in the event of a pandemic.

Centre for Health Protection Website
www.chp.gov.hk

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