



Avian Flu

Fact Sheet for the Public

- Avian flu is an infection caused by bird flu viruses. These flu viruses occur naturally among birds. Wild birds worldwide carry the viruses in their intestines, but usually do not get sick from them. However, bird flu is very contagious among birds and can make some domesticated birds, including chickens, ducks, and turkeys, very sick and kill them.
- Beginning in late 2003, infection with avian influenza A (H5N1) among poultry was reported by several countries in South-East Asia: Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Thailand and Viet Nam. Outbreaks in Malaysia were reported in 2004, followed by reports in Russia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Turkey, and Romania in 2005. The disease spread into areas of Europe and Africa in early 2006.
- Bird flu viruses do not usually infect humans, but more than 190 confirmed cases of human infection with the H5N1 bird flu virus have occurred since 2003, including 109 deaths. So far, there have been no avian or human cases in the United States associated with the current outbreak of avian influenza A (H5N1).
- The risk of getting bird flu is low for most people because the virus occurs mainly among birds and does not usually infect humans. However, during an outbreak of bird flu among poultry (domesticated chicken, ducks, turkeys), there is a possible risk to people who have contact with infected birds or surfaces that have been contaminated with excretions from infected birds.
- Experts fear that bird flu could trigger the next flu pandemic by mutating to become capable of passing easily from person to person. Despite isolated reports of human-to-human spread, so far there is no evidence of sustained person-to-person transmission.
- Medical and public health personnel in the U. S. are watching closely to find any bird flu cases. MDCH and local health departments are prepared to detect and prevent the spread of bird flu.
- Work is under way to produce a vaccine against bird flu. However, if the virus mutates significantly, the vaccine may not prove effective. There is evidence that one antiviral drug, Tamiflu is effective against bird flu, but until a pandemic flu virus derived from bird flu emerges and spreads it is not possible to predict how effective Tamiflu will be.