

# Health Officer Q&A

## PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

### Questions & Answers with Dr. Tony Iton

Alameda County Health Officer, Winter 2006

#### **I'm getting a regular flu shot. Does it protect against the bird flu?**

No, the regular flu shot will not protect against bird flu. Currently there is no bird flu vaccine available.

#### **How do people get bird flu?**

People get bird flu from having contact with infected birds or contaminated surfaces. Infected birds shed the virus in saliva and feces (droppings). A person can catch bird flu when an infected chicken coughs or sneezes onto a person's face, or when a person breathes in bird dropping particles from an infected bird.

#### **What are the symptoms of bird flu?**

First, remember there haven't been any birds in the U.S. with bird flu. If you were exposed to birds sick with bird flu in another country, you may not have symptoms in up to 10-14 days. The illness has flu-like symptoms of fever, cough, sore throat, muscle aches, shortness of breath, diarrhea, and even eye infections. Serious cases of bird flu cause life-threatening breathing problems including pneumonia. The current bird flu has been very lethal when humans are infected.

#### **Is it safe to eat chickens?**

Again, there are no birds in the US with bird flu. If bird flu is discovered here, as long as chicken or any poultry has been fully cooked it is safe to eat. You may be able to get the virus by eating undercooked poultry. As a general practice, all poultry should be thoroughly cooked.

#### **I have a trip next week to Asia, should I cancel?**

There is no need to cancel your trip at this time. But it is important for anybody traveling to areas of the world that have bird flu outbreaks to avoid any contact with poultry. Stay away from sick birds. Stay away from live poultry markets where birds and people can be in close contact. It is also important to get your flu shot for seasonal flu.

#### **So why there is so much talk about the bird flu, is the danger being overstated?**

The reason it gets so much attention is that we simply don't know whether this virus will change and cause the next pandemic flu in humans. Pandemic influenza is a worldwide outbreak of a new influenza (flu) virus for which there is little or no immunity (protection) in the human population. Scientists and health professionals are concerned that the current virus in birds may develop into the next human pandemic flu strain, spread easily from person to person, causing serious illness and death.

#### **Does the current flu vaccine help protect me against the pandemic flu?**

No, the flu shot being offered this year does not protect against any pandemic flu strain, whether it's avian or another kind. But it is very important that people get flu shots to protect against regular, seasonal flu.

#### **Do you really think that this pandemic flu is likely to happen? What are the chances of it happening in the U.S. over the next couple of years?**

There have been three pandemics of influenza in the last century. One of them in 1918-19, the Spanish flu pandemic, was disastrous. Right now, we do not have a pandemic. What we have is an avian influenza virus that has affected people who have had direct contact with infected chickens, and is not easily transmitted from one person to another.

# Questions & Answers with Dr. Tony Iton, continued

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One thing we know about flu viruses is that they are unpredictable and it's possible that this virus could change, become more contagious and set off the beginnings of a pandemic. We can't predict how likely that is. We can't predict whether the next pandemic will be because of this particular virus or some other strain of flu. What we do know is that we are past due for a worldwide pandemic and the steps that we are taking now to prepare will help protect our community whenever the next pandemic happens.

### So if pandemic flu does happen, how bad could it be?

When new pandemic flu spreads it creates a public health emergency. This emergency will not be like anything we've faced before. A pandemic will last longer, make more people seriously ill and may cause more deaths than any other health crisis in our time. So we must be prepared in case this current bird flu changes and causes the next influenza pandemic. That is why federal, state and local authorities are increasing pandemic flu preparation efforts.

### If it happens, is there anything I can do to stay healthy?

The influenza virus is usually spread in the air when people cough or sneeze. Some basic steps you can take to protect yourself and others will be:

- Stay healthy. Keep up your good health by eating a balanced diet, exercising daily, getting enough rest and drinking fluids.
- Wash hands frequently using soap and water.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with tissues. Cough and sneeze into your sleeves. Put used tissues in the trash and then wash your hands.
- If you get sick, stay home and away from others as much as possible. Keep sick children home from school.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

### Additional Information?

It is up to each of us to learn about this potential threat and take the steps needed to be prepared.

**Please go to the following sites for more information:**

- [www.acphd.org](http://www.acphd.org) for general information
- [www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/) for information on Avian Influenza
- [www.who.org](http://www.who.org) for travel health-related information
- [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org) for emergency preparation plans
- [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov) for pandemic influenza updates

### Five Fast Facts

- 1) NO birds in the United States have shown signs of the current bird (avian) flu.
- 2) Humans can catch avian flu from infected birds and their droppings, but so far the disease does not seem to be transmitted between humans.
- 3) If the bird flu virus "learns" how to spread easily from person to person, it will be a new human virus strain and people will have little or no immunity (protection) against it.
- 4) At this time, we cannot predict if or when pandemic influenza may occur.
- 5) The best protection is to stay informed and stay healthy. Cover your cough with tissue, wash your hands frequently, and follow healthy food, sleep and exercise habits.