

Bird flu is not human pandemic flu: understanding the difference

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It is important for people to understand that avian influenza (i.e., “bird flu”) is not the same thing as human pandemic flu.

Avian influenza (AI) is a respiratory virus that affects birds. There are more than 140 possible strains of AI, and most are mild, producing little or no sickness in bird populations. The mild form of AI, which does not threaten human health or food safety, is known as low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI).

Unlike LPAI, highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) makes birds very sick and results in a high level of mortality in birds. One strain of HPAI, which has never been detected in the United States, is classified as H5N1 HPAI (Asian lineage). This strain emerged in Asia several years ago, and has spread to wild birds and domestic poultry in Africa and Europe.

H5N1 HPAI has drawn attention of world health officials because, unlike most other HPAI strains, it has infected people, albeit a relatively small number of people, who came in very close contact with sick birds. It is not easy for a person to contract H5N1 HPAI. It takes a massive dose of virus particles lodged deep in the human lung for illness to occur. Less than 200 people have contracted the virus, and most of these people came in very close contact with sick poultry. H5N1 HPAI remains primarily an animal disease with a relatively low number of humans impacted.

Federal officials, however, have warned about a possible worldwide pandemic of influenza in humans if the H5N1 HPAI were to change into a new virus that passes easily from person to person. This mutation has not yet happened, and some scientists say it may never happen. But if it were to happen, it would no longer be avian influenza; it would be human pandemic flu.

Unfortunately, in some news reports and other sources of information there is not a clear distinction between avian influenza and pandemic flu. While it’s important to be aware of and prepared for various threats to public health and safety, including pandemic influenza, it’s also vitally important to identify and understand the significant difference between avian influenza and human pandemic flu.

For additional information, visit www.avianflu.gov or www.avianinfluenzainfo.com.