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## Frequently asked questions about avian flu

### **What is avian influenza (H5N1)?**

Avian influenza (H5N1), commonly known as “bird flu,” is a strain of influenza that causes a viral infection that can spread easily and quickly among birds. Transmission to humans is rare.

### **Where is avian influenza (H5N1) a concern?**

Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa have all had outbreaks of avian influenza (H5N1) in poultry since 1997.

### **How is avian influenza (H5N1) transmitted?**

Though rare, humans can contract avian influenza through exposure to birds infected with the virus. Human-to-human transmission is limited, and usually requires a prolonged period of close contact with infected individuals. Most human cases have been traced to direct contact with live infected birds or their droppings.

### **Am I at risk of contracting H5N1 in Alberta?**

This virus is not circulating in Alberta, or in Canada at this time. Albertans are not at risk of H5N1. To date, the only human cases of H5N1 reported in an Albertan was travel-related. The individual was NOT exposed to the virus in Alberta or Canada.

### **Am I at risk of contracting H5N1 if I travel?**

Infection with avian influenza (H5N1) in humans is rare, and the risk for most travellers is low. It is always important to consult a doctor, nurse or health care provider, or visit a travel health clinic at least six weeks before you travel, to determine risks and precautions.

If you are travelling to an area [where avian influenza \(H5N1\) is a concern](#):

- avoid high-risk areas such as poultry farms and live animal markets;
- avoid unnecessary contact with birds, including chickens, ducks and wild birds;
- avoid surfaces that may have bird droppings or secretions on them; and
- ensure that all [poultry dishes are well cooked, including eggs](#).

To date, human-to-human infection spread is very rare.

### **What can happen if I become infected with H5N1?**

People who become infected with avian influenza (H5N1) can become seriously ill and in some cases die. Fatality rate among hospitalized patients with confirmed infection is high. Antiviral drugs may be able to reduce the severity and duration of illness, if taken early enough. In more severe cases people may develop serious respiratory conditions such as pneumonia which may lead to death.

### **What are the symptoms of H5N1 infection?**

The symptoms of H5N1 resemble typical influenza symptoms. Specifically, these symptoms include a fever and cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing. Other early symptoms could include muscle aches, headache, sore throat, abdominal pain, vomiting, and diarrhea. Symptoms typically appear from two to 10 days after exposure to virus.

### **Does the seasonal influenza vaccine protect me against H5N1?**

No, the seasonal influenza vaccine is developed to protect against what are expected to be the most common strains of influenza circulating during flu season. For example, in Alberta, H1N1 is one of the currently circulating influenza strains and the seasonal vaccine does protect against it.

### **Is there a vaccine available for H5N1?**

There is currently no vaccine that exists for H5N1.

### **What precautions can I take to protect myself against H5N1?**

1. **If you are travelling to an area [where avian influenza \(H5N1\) is a concern](#):**
  - avoid high-risk areas such as poultry farms and live animal markets;
  - avoid unnecessary contact with birds, including chickens, ducks and wild birds;
  - avoid surfaces that may have bird droppings or secretions on them; and
  - ensure that all [poultry dishes are well cooked, including eggs](#).
2. **Wash your hands frequently:**
  - Wash your hands with soap under warm running water.
  - Alcohol-based hand sanitizer can also be used if soap and water are not readily available. It's a good idea to keep some with you in your pocket or purse when you travel.
3. **Monitor your health:**
  - If you develop flu-like symptoms while travelling, or after you return to Canada, you should see a health care provider.
  - Tell your health care provider that you have been travelling or living in an area where avian influenza (H5N1) is a concern.