

The Facts About Avian Influenza or 'Bird Flu'

Helpful Contacts

U.S. Meat and Poultry Hotline

1-888-674-6854

American Meat Institute Foundation

1150 Connecticut Ave., NW

12th Floor

Washington, DC 20036

202/587-4200

www.poultrysafety.org

U.S. Department of Agriculture

www.usda.gov

The Facts About Avian Influenza or 'Bird Flu'

The recent flurry of publicity about avian influenza, often called 'bird flu,' has led some consumers to ask if they should be concerned about poultry safety. Leading experts in the field say an unequivocal 'no.'

Government, industry and academic experts alike advise a calm head and safe food handling to ensure good health all year round. Properly cooked and handled poultry does not pose a risk of avian influenza.

Following are some questions commonly asked by consumers with helpful answers.

What is avian influenza?

Many strains of influenza viruses can infect birds and cause an infection known as avian influenza or AI, often called "bird flu." These flu viruses occur naturally among birds and have been recognized as a poultry disease since 1901.

Some forms are called "low pathogenic," while others are referred to as "high pathogenic," depending on the risk they pose to the bird that becomes infected. Avian influenza can be transmitted easily from bird to bird and can make chickens, ducks and turkeys very sick. Many birds that become ill die.

How is avian influenza spread among poultry?

Birds infected with AI shed flu virus in their saliva, nasal secretions and droppings. That is why it is so important to contain poultry raised for food under secure conditions as we do in the U.S.

Have U.S. poultry been infected with the 'Asian' strain H5N1?

No, there has never been an outbreak of the high pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza strain now impacting Asia and Europe. In the last several years, other avian influenza strains have been detected in the U.S. Those outbreaks have been contained and the virus eradicated from poultry flocks.

Can humans become sick with avian influenza?

The avian influenza virus rarely infects humans. When it does, the cause is typically direct contact by humans with infected birds. In other parts of the world, direct contact with live poultry is much more common. In the U.S., it is extremely rare and those who need to handle live poultry receive special training to protect themselves.

"Poultry is safe to eat. Cooking poultry will kill the virus. It is as simple as that."

Agriculture Secretary
Mike Johanns,
U.S. AgNet,
March 6, 2006

How is U.S. poultry production different from production in other parts of the world?

In the U.S., poultry production is done under carefully controlled and contained conditions where biosecurity and limited access to live birds is the norm. In other parts of the world, however, poultry can be found raised in more open, less secure conditions. In some cases, poultry live in backyards or wander streets.

Free movement of poultry in these nations can increase the risk of transmission from flock to flock. And direct contact between birds and humans in these uncontrolled conditions can increase the risk to humans if a bird is infected. These high risk conditions are virtually non-existent in the U.S.

Does the U.S. import poultry?

Nearly all poultry sold in the U.S. meat case is raised and processed in the U.S. A small percentage of poultry sold domestically is imported from Canada – a nation that has the same programs in place to prevent, detect and eradicate this strain of the virus if it did occur.

What is the U.S. doing to prevent the introduction of the disease here?

The U.S. maintains strict controls on imports from affected nations. The U.S. is a net exporter of poultry and does not import Asian poultry. In addition, the U.S. has an aggressive monitoring program to detect and contain the disease if it occurs in U.S. poultry.

In 2006, the U.S. pledged \$334 million toward a \$1.9 billion effort to control high pathogenic avian influenza from spreading further around the world and to reduce the likelihood of a pandemic.

Can Americans contract avian influenza from handling and preparing poultry cuts?

It cannot be stressed enough that the U.S. does not have the form of AI now impacting Asia and Europe.

It is reassuring to note, however, that the same safe handling practices that ensure safe meat and poultry every day would be effective in the unlikely event that a person handled poultry containing the avian influenza virus.

These practices include washing hands before and after handling poultry and cooking poultry a minimum of 165 degrees F. As always, it is important to separate raw and cooked foods during all food handling practices.