

What You Should Know About:

Avian Influenza

May 2006

Introduction

There is much discussion in the media today about Avian Influenza, otherwise known as “bird flu”. It is important that Michigan residents understand the real issues of this disease, what is true, and what isn’t.

Avian Influenza Threat in the US

Various strains of low pathogenic avian influenza have been present since the early 1900’s and continue to occur at a low level in the United States. These current strains of the virus are mild and do not cause a fatal disease in humans. The virus that has appeared in the news lately, and is causing worldwide concern, is an Asian strain of high pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza. To date, the H5N1 high pathogenic strain has never been found in the US. While there is a possibility that this strain could emerge in the US, the disease is being monitored closely and currently is only found in Asia, Europe, Africa, and the United Kingdom (Scotland).

The Asian strain of avian influenza H5N1 could eventually get to the US as wild migratory birds (especially waterfowl) and poultry are spreading it across Asia and Europe. There is a potential for this strain of H5N1 to be brought to the US in 3 possible ways: 1) the virus may be spread by infected waterfowl that migrate from Alaska south to the US (Fall 2006), 2) through illegal transport of birds from the infected areas into the US, and/or 3) if the virus should become capable of spreading from human-to-human, then air travel by humans could bring the virus to the US.

Human Health Threats in the US from Avian Influenza

The high pathogenic strain of the H5N1 virus has not yet developed the ability to spread from person to person. Most people that are currently becoming infected have had close contact with sick or dead poultry. There is a possibility that close contact with dead wild birds with H5N1 (such as with defeathering) can transmit the virus to a human. Wildlife also carry many other diseases that can affect humans; therefore, it is recommended that people avoid bare-handed contact when handling dead animals, including birds, at any time. This will be especially true if the high pathogenic H5N1 virus appears in the US.

Eating Chicken, Turkey and Other Poultry Products

It is safe to eat cooked chicken, turkey, and other poultry products. Most poultry meat and eggs sold at grocery stores and meat markets are produced in the US. In addition, the US has banned the import of poultry and poultry products from infected areas or countries, unless the commodity has been tested and proven to be non-infectious. In this way, the US is protecting our poultry products from being contaminated by the Asian strain H5N1 virus.

Consumers should use good food handling and preparation practices, such as making sure that poultry products are refrigerated, observing the expiration date, avoiding cross-contamination from raw to cooked meat, uncooked vegetables or eggs, and making sure meat and egg products are fully cooked (minimum 165°F). As always, wash your

hands after handling raw poultry products and especially before you eat. Doing these things helps protect you from many different disease organisms including avian influenza.

Poultry Production in the US and Michigan

Commercial poultry production in the US and Michigan includes strict biosecurity measures at the farm level which ensure a safe and wholesome food product. While there have been concerns for animal welfare when raising poultry in confinement, this practice allows poultry producers to raise chickens and turkeys in a healthy and safe environment, free from contamination by avian diseases.

Poultry which are raised outdoors such as small poultry flocks, are at much greater risk of being exposed to diseases like avian influenza and parasites which are often carried by wild birds. When wild waterfowl share watering, feeding and living areas with domestic poultry, the possibility for contamination increases significantly. This is how the disease has spread to domestic poultry and then to humans in Asia and Europe. Small flock poultry producers are encouraged to increase biosecurity by providing a barrier between domestic poultry and wild birds (keep poultry in and wild birds out).

Handling Waterfowl and Game Birds When Hunting

As mentioned above, the high pathogenic Asian strain H5N1 virus is currently not found in the US. State and federal wildlife agencies have established an intensive surveillance program for H5N1. Should this virus appear in the US, transmission of the disease from game birds could take place. The most likely method is through significant contact with guts and gut contents when handling or dressing the bird. Hunters are encouraged to use sanitary methods when handling and dressing birds, including the use of rubber gloves. Normal cooking of waterfowl and upland birds, like other poultry products, will kill the virus at temperatures above 165° F.

Trusted Sources of Information

There are a number of organizations that can provide fact-based and trusted information regarding avian influenza. Websites for each of these agencies are below:

HSS Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): <http://www.cdc.gov> <http://www.pandemicflu.gov>

World Health Organization (WHO): <http://www.who.int/en/>

Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS): <http://www.aphis.usda.gov>

Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH): <http://www.michigan.gov/mdch>

Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA): <http://www.michigan.gov/mda>

Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR): <http://www.michigan.gov/dnr>

Michigan State University Extension (MSUE): <http://www.msue.msu.edu/emergency>

Note: This fact sheet was co-authored by representatives of Michigan State University Extension and the MSU Center for Population & Animal Health, the Michigan Department of Community Health, the Michigan Department of Agriculture, and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.



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