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Easing worries about avian flu

What is avian or bird flu? Daily, I see reports about a potential flu pandemic. Networks even produce terrifying, made-for-TV movies about it. Should I be concerned? Can I still eat poultry? Are feather pillows safe? Are there things I should do to prepare?

The short answer to these questions is that you should not be worried about becoming sick with the avian (bird) flu. There have been no cases of person-to-person transmission of the avian flu.

Poultry is safe to eat, if properly prepared and cooked. There is more danger that eating poultry with bacterial contamination will cause you to become ill than that it will lead to bird flu. Feathers from healthy flocks and the pillows made from them are safe.

There are no specific precautions to take at this time, but using tried-and-true infection-control measures - such as washing hands frequently, covering your mouth or nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, and staying home when sick - is always good advice. Stockpiling water, medication, and nonperishable foods in the home in sufficient quantity to last a week or two is probably a good precaution to take in case of any emergency, such as a hurricane or blizzard.

Let's review a little background on the flu. Almost everyone has suffered some type of infection caused by the influenza A or B virus. Influenza (the flu) occurs every winter, causing fever, chills, headache, sore throat, and coughing in up to 40 percent of the nation's children. Most get better quickly, but for some, symptoms can last weeks and complications are common. These viruses change their makeup every year, meaning that we can become ill multiple times in our lives with influenza.

We have come to expect and tolerate the yearly outbreaks, as they are usually gone in four to six weeks and for most, the illness is mild. Occasionally, however, influenza becomes "pandemic," causing a worldwide epidemic occurrence of much more severe illness. Pandemics are rare and occurred only

three times in the 20th century (1918, 1957, 1968). The medical and scientific community is concerned about the current bird flu because it has been almost 40 years since the last pandemic and we are long overdue. In addition, the 1918 pandemic that killed more than 20 million people worldwide was an avian variant of influenza A.

A virus that appears quite similar to the deadly 1918 variant is causing illness in birds around the world. This virus, known as H5N1, was first encountered in East Asia a few years ago and has spread by bird migration throughout Asia, Europe, and Africa. Contact between wild birds and domestic poultry has, at times, lead to severe illness and high mortality rates in the domestic animals. Concern is rising about this virus' ability to change, as there are recent reports of infections in pigs, household cats, leopards and tigers in other parts of the world.

Human infection with H5N1 is so far very rare, with only 200 cases reported worldwide since intensive surveillance began in 1997. In each case, the infection was caused by close contact with infected poultry or with surfaces that had been contaminated. It is critically important to note that though we have seen bird-to-bird and bird-to-human infection, there has been no person-to-person infection. Humans can become ill, but a pandemic cannot occur unless the virus changes and becomes capable of person-to-person transmission.

Governments around the world are monitoring the spread of this virus to ensure early detection. Advance warning would allow public health officials time to isolate the illness through quarantine, treat the illness with the drug Tamiflu, and distribute new vaccines. Work on new vaccines is progressing rapidly with an announcement by a French manufacturer this week that they think they have developed a safe and effective product.

If you have additional concerns or want more information regarding avian flu, check out www.aap.org/new/influenza-birdflu.htm

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