

Safety > Bird Flu



Keep calm when you see the stories in the newspaper, and use common sense.

The traditional flu season brings its usual warnings and trials every year. We are used to its symptoms, line up for vaccinations (or not), and suffer through our own sickness or the complaining of our coworkers. Yet we tend to ignore the real damage it does - millions of people are incapacitated and thousands die each year. Familiarity with the disease certainly has bred contempt, but also has made it easy to discount.

When the SARS mass outbreaks of the post-9/11 era took place, the world definitely took notice. As you recall, Toronto and Hong Kong shut down, and it took nearly a year for the Pacific Rim business cycle to recover. As cases of avian influenza popped up the next year, the mass media was quick to proclaim it the next global pandemic. Your friends and relatives are likely to conflate these two diseases, since they've both occurred in East Asia.

There are important differences between SARS and Bird Flu. SARS was easy to catch - spread just like a cold, through sneezes and hand-to-hand contact. However, also like a cold, SARS had a (relatively) low mortality rate - most severely affecting those who already had health problems. While hundreds died, many thousands were infected.

Bird Flu, on the other hand, has a frighteningly high mortality rate - almost everyone who catches it does die - and strikes healthy people. Before you panic, though, know that this virus has a significant difference from the influenza strains that strike us every year: so far the H5N1 variant has been very difficult for humans to contract.

The people who have come down with this disease have common traits that you almost certainly do not:

- They live with poultry. We don't mean they live on a farm with chickens in a separate building; they literally have birds living in the same rooms they sleep and eat in.
- The birds often have some connection / contact with wild or migratory fowl, not necessarily their same species. The disease can jump from bird to bird easily. (No evidence yet that it can jump from human to human, and we hope it stays that way.)
- They frequently handle bird excrement, dead animals, and often prepare & cook the birds they've been exposed to otherwise.

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Over the 2008-2009 flu season , seven people in China contracted the disease and five died. Consider that millions of people have potentially been exposed, and you can see that the transmission rate is extremely low.

Your odds are pretty good. However, common sense says you should limit your possible exposure:

- If you tour “live markets”, give the poultry stalls a wide berth.
- Should you have the chance to take a trip into the countryside, stay out of poultry barns.
- Don’t let your children pet or play with birds, even the ones at the park.
- Wash your hands frequently.
- If you believe you have been served undercooked chicken, don’t eat it just to be polite. If the food seems “wrong,” it is.

Be sure to talk with your medical provider about this subject as part of your pre-trip checkup and inoculation process. (We aren’t doctors.) Avian influenza is not “just the flu,” but it is also not a trip-canceling plague.

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