



Qatargas Medical Department

Bird Flu *facts*

What is avian influenza (bird flu)?

Bird flu - known technically as avian influenza - is a highly contagious viral disease affecting mostly chickens, ducks, turkeys, geese and other birds, and was first identified more than 100 years ago.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Illness tends to develop within one to five days of exposure to the virus. Sometimes the only indication of the disease is a relatively mild eye infection (conjunctivitis). But more often signs and symptoms of bird flu resemble those of common flu including: cough, fever, sore throat, muscle aches.

What are risk factors in humans?

The greatest risk factor seems to be contact with sick birds or with surfaces contaminated by their feathers, saliva or droppings. Young children seems especially vulnerable to the virus. At present, the bird flu virus is only slightly infectious to humans and **cannot be transmitted from one human to another**. However, experts fear bird flu may evolve into a virus that could be transferred among humans.

When to seek medical advice?

See your doctor immediately if you develop flu symptoms, including a fever, cough and body aches and have recently traveled to a part of the world where bird flu occurs. Be sure to let your doctor know when and where you were traveling and whether you visited any farms or open-air markets.

How is bird flu in humans treated?

Right now, the primary treatment option is the flu drug Oseltamivir (Tamiflu) which can be prescribed to specific group of individuals (e.g. recent travelers from high-risk countries). The medicine works by preventing the virus from escaping its host cell. The drug has to be taken within two days after the appearance of symptoms.

Is there a vaccine to protect humans from bird flu virus?

There is currently no vaccine to protect humans against the bird flu virus that is being seen in Asia.

What is the difference between bird flu and SARS?

Both bird flu and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) are respiratory diseases, and both have caused widespread epidemics in Asia in the last 12 months. Both diseases are also zoonoses, meaning they originate in animals but are transferred to humans.

But while the media coverage of the bird flu and SARS epidemics has made it easy to confuse the two, SARS and bird flu are very different. Bird flu is caused by influenza viruses, similar to those that cause human flu. In contrast, SARS is caused by a previously unknown type of 'coronavirus', the same family of viruses as that which causes the common cold. Also, the SARS virus is highly dangerous to humans, whereas at present, the bird flu viruses are not.

What are the food safety implications?

Due to survival capability of the virus, common food preservation processes such as freezing and refrigeration will not substantially reduce the concentration or virulence of these viruses on contaminated meat. It can, however, be inactivated by normal cooking (at temperatures above 70°C. These will include thorough cooking of poultry meat and eggs.

As a general guideline to food safety, attached is a World Health Organization poster of the **5 Keys to Safer Food**.