

AVIAN INFLUENZA – SHOULD I BE SCARED?!

There has been a great deal of news about avian influenza recently. Stories have ranged from doomsday predictions to those who say it is all being overblown. So, should you be concerned, as a poultry owner or just as a human being?

Yes, you should be concerned. Will something happen? Let's hope not, but it could be very bad.

Currently, there is an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in Asia and Eastern Europe. This influenza virus, which is of H5N1 type, is highly pathogenic to most domestic birds, that is, it kills many of those that become infected. It has also infected some people, and has killed about half of those who are known to be infected. (H and N types refer to the specific strain. There are several different types of avian influenza, and they are identified by these H and N components. For more information on this, see web sites below.)

It is likely being spread by migratory birds, which can carry the virus without showing symptoms. Fortunately, this virus is currently **not present** in the United States.

CONCERN FOR POULTRY

If the virus comes to the U.S., it likely will be devastating to the commercial poultry industry and hobbyists alike. It might get here in migratory birds flying in, in birds smuggled in, or in bird manure on someone's shoes, etc. The virus can remain stable for fairly long periods in the environment.

The standard method for dealing with an outbreak like this is to depopulate all birds within a certain range of an outbreak. So, if it's found on a farm in Wisconsin, for example, all birds within some distance of that farm would be euthanized. If things are caught in time, and the virus does not spread, that would be great. Unfortunately, this virus spreads easily from bird to bird. Outbreaks in the past have taken some time and the destruction of many birds before they were eliminated. There is also the temptation to hide birds or take them from the area, and this greatly increases the risk of spreading the disease. As an example, an outbreak in Mexico in 1992 took more than 3 years to eradicate.

COSTS

Export markets would immediately be closed so sales would decrease drastically. Depending on the location of the outbreak, many birds might have to be depopulated. Rare breeds and varieties might be lost. Time and money spent euthanizing and destroying the birds also adds up quickly. While you can't be infected with avian influenza from eating properly cooked eggs or poultry products, many people would stop buying these products out of fear. It would be very, very expensive for the poultry industry.

CONCERN FOR HUMANS

Currently, most of the people who have been diagnosed with this influenza (in Asia) have had direct contact with poultry. In many cases, the people were either sleeping in the same building as the birds, or living in very close proximity. The virus doesn't seem to be easily transmitted from one human to another, if at all. A big problem with the avian influenza virus, however, is that it can mutate very easily.

The concern is that it will mutate into a contagious virus in humans. If that happens, then it can, and most likely will, spread throughout the world very quickly. This is what happened in 1918, when there was a global outbreak. That outbreak killed an estimated 40 to 50 million people. Even with an improved health care system, there is still the potential for a huge loss of life world-wide.

What is our government doing, you may ask? Currently in the U.S., flocks are being monitored for signs of avian influenza. Customs and immigration officials are watching closely for anyone attempting to smuggle birds into the country, or for anyone who has recently been in contact with poultry in countries with known outbreaks. Vaccines for the birds could be developed, but they aren't available at this time, and since this virus mutates so often, any vaccine that is made now might not be protective in the future. It would also take quite some time to produce enough vaccines to combat a widespread outbreak.

So, should you as a poultry grower, be concerned? The answer is yes, although I wouldn't suggest you panic or get rid of your birds because of this. Good **biosecurity** measures are important to protect your flock. Don't allow your birds to mingle with wild birds. Don't borrow other people's equipment. Clean your shoes and clothes if you have contact with other people's birds. If you purchase birds, or if you bring your own birds home after a show or swap meet, keep those birds isolated from your regular flock for at least 2 weeks, while watching for any signs of illness in the quarantined birds. Tend to your home flock before taking care of the new or returning birds.

Common-sense principles are very important to help prevent the spread of this disease as well as other poultry diseases, and should always be followed. The potential for a serious AI problem just emphasizes the importance of biosecurity.

Again, it's important to note that one cannot be infected with AI by eating cooked poultry products or eggs.

For more information, both the WHO and the CDC have excellent materials available on the web:

www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/

www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/

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