

FAQs Information on Avian and Pandemic Influenza

What are the differences between seasonal, avian and pandemic flu?

Seasonal flu moves around the world usually once a year, and is generally not deadly. Public health researchers are able to forecast the exact strain of the flu that will likely sweep the globe and prepare a vaccination for it. Avian flu on the other hand is normally contained to birds, with isolated cases of human infection. When an outbreak of a disease occurs in one location and is capable of spreading person to person it is called an epidemic. Once an epidemic spreads to multiple geographic locations, or goes worldwide, then it is a pandemic.

What is the avian flu?

Simply put, the avian flu is an influenza virus that is adapted to the bird populations. It is cause for concern because it can mutate in a way that allows it to be spread from person to person. In recent years there have been isolated incidents where it has spread beyond birds to humans, but not between them. Avian flu that has managed to infect humans is quite serious and planning for a wide spread pandemic is prudent.

What is the University at Albany doing to prepare for a pandemic?

A task force has been convened consisting of essentially all UAlbany departments. It is headed by the department of Environmental Health and Safety. This task force is actively developing a plan by which all departments will know their defined role in the event of a pandemic (whether due to avian flu or any other infectious disease). This plan is based on New York State's Pandemic Flu Plan as well as the plan of the federal government. Concrete steps which have already been taken include the stockpiling of medical goods and equipment, defining criteria for campus and classroom closure, identifying key personnel and their roles during a pandemic, developing specific plans for caring for ill students, as well as efficient and accurate dissemination of crucial information to the campus.

How can I personally prepare for a pandemic?

The most important thing as a college student is to know how you would get home if the campus needed to close. Have alternate plans in place in case planes, trains, or even buses are shut down or very crowded. Possibly have someone you know locally take you in. Encourage your family at home to have emergency supplies and plans ready.

This CDC site has useful information

<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/individual/index.html#checklist>

How will I know what to do in a pandemic? How will the University communicate with me?

Check your email. Email is an official means of communication with the student body and therefore messages and updates will be distributed in that manner. Messages will also be communicated in the residence halls and by posters around campus. Also continue to check the UAlbany website as updates will be posted there.

In the event of a pandemic, when would our campus close?

When our campus would close depends greatly on the circumstances surrounding the outbreak. We would close only when a pandemic was imminent, but before all modes of transportation are closed to students.

How can I protect myself (and others) against influenza?

In the event a pandemic strikes, the best form of defense will be limiting contact with others, frequent hand washing, and when possible, wearing a medically designed mask for protection from droplets spread by coughing and sneezing by others.

How long would it take for a pandemic to pass? When would we reopen?

Historically, pandemics come in waves, so it is difficult to say. We would stay closed until the governmental health agencies advise us that it is safe to re-open. Most experts believe a first pandemic wave would last 6-12 weeks.

What is the status of vaccination development for the bird flu?

There is currently no effective avian flu vaccine for humans, although researchers are working on it. There are clinical trials for the major strain of the bird flu, and work is beginning on a second possible strain. Experts believe a vaccine most likely will not be available for an avian flu pandemic during its first wave. One may be available during subsequent waves.

How is the disease transmitted?

Birds transmit avian flu via saliva, nasal secretions and feces. Other birds can pick up the disease from coming into contact with those secretions, or contaminated surfaces. At present, it is very rare and difficult for a human to catch the avian flu, but some strains have been known to infect humans. Once infected the virus spreads through the body very quickly and is therefore very serious. **At this time there are no documented cases where an infected human spread the disease to other humans.** However, a mutation of the virus might create a strain that could.

What is the current risk to humans?

Currently there is very little risk for humans to catch the avian flu. In fact most cases are isolated to Southeast and East Asia where people live in close domestic proximity to domesticated birds such as chickens.

What are the risks for international travelers?

International travelers should be aware of the current state of avian flu outbreaks in the area they're visiting- especially if they are traveling to rural Southeast or East Asia. Visitors to these areas should avoid live animal markets, or surfaces that have bird secretions. As with any international travel one should consult a doctor in order to get up to date immunizations and travel advice.

Could migratory birds "import" the virus to the United States?

Theoretically, because birds can carry the virus, and spread it via various secretions, birds that are migrating to, from, or through the US could spread the virus. However, there haven't been cases of this type of highly pathogenic avian flu in any birds in the Western Hemisphere. It should be noted that a low pathogenic form of avian flu has been infecting birds in this country for years and poses no risk to humans. Currently no forms of the highly pathogenic form of avian flu have been seen in the U.S. bird population.

Can the avian flu be spread through air conditioning systems?

The World Health Organization advises that there isn't a risk that the avian flu could be spread via air conditioning systems.

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Should our campus stockpile Tamiflu? Protective masks? Will I be provided these?

There are no proven vaccines for the avian flu and the antiviral medications would be in such short supply that their distribution would go to the neediest as determined by the Department of Health. The University is not in a position to acquire or stockpile these medications. Protective masks would only be provided to ill patients receiving evaluation and treatment at the Health Center. In the event that these need to be distributed the Department of Health and/or the Center for Disease Control would get them to whoever needs them.

What do I do if I see a dead bird on campus?

Do not touch it. Report this to any grounds crew, call 442-3400, or tell a member of the Residential Life Staff.