

Asian Bird Flu News Release

The American Association of Avian Pathologists
953 College Station Road, Athens, GA 30602
Phone: (706) 542-5645 E-mail: aaap@uga.edu

American College of Poultry Veterinarians
382 West Street Road, Kennett Square, PA 19348
Phone: (610) 444-4282 E-mail: acpv@vet.upenn.edu

The potential for increased human-to-human transmission of avian influenza (“Bird Flu”) is a concern of U.S. public health officials. In poultry, the United States has safeguards in place to preclude the outbreak of Bird Flu such as the epidemic occurring in Southeast Asia. According to the American Association of Avian Pathologists and the American College of Poultry Veterinarians, an outbreak such as the H5N1 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in poultry is unlikely in the U.S.

The H5N1 designation comes from the arrangement of proteins on the surface of the virus that causes the disease. In addition to HPAI and its many strains, there are also Low Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (LPAI) strains.

Considerable effort has been made to both prevent the introduction of Asian Bird Flu into the U.S. poultry industry as well as to prepare a response if it were to be introduced into the country. Banning importation of birds and bird products from the infected areas as well as strict importation controls are the federal government’s first line of defense. Virtually all chicken and turkey sold in the United States is domestically produced.

Whenever the U.S. poultry industry encountered AI (LPAI or HPAI) in the past, the infected flocks were humanely destroyed and disposed of through environmentally sound methods. Monitoring and surveillance for avian influenza, which includes Asian Bird Flu, is performed constantly within the poultry industry.

We normally do not consider avian influenza to be a virus that can spread from birds to people (a zoonotic infection). In Southeast Asia, eradication of diseased chickens, ducks and other birds has been undertaken by soldiers and other workers with no ill effect. A small number of people in Thailand and Vietnam, who are in direct contact with live, infected poultry, have developed the human form of the disease. The virus lives mainly in the respiratory and gastrointestinal systems and is spread through droplets of respiratory moisture and feces of the infected birds. While human-to-human transmission is apparently possible, it is extremely rare.

Those who have studied the disease say the practice of poultry running free (so called “village chickens”) commingling with wild birds and other animal species must be stopped. They claim this practice has led to outbreaks of the disease. Conversely, the U.S. maintains much higher health standards for birds which are raised in flocks housed in modern, climate-controlled poultry houses and fed a nutritional formula.

There is no danger of acquiring Bird Flu from properly cooked poultry or poultry products. In the United States there is virtually no chance of encountering meat from chickens or turkeys infected with influenza, but standard, good food-handling practices of washing hands after contact with raw poultry would greatly reduce the chance of any food-related disease outbreak.