

Avian Flu

What is Avian Flu?

Avian or bird flu is an infection caused by avian influenza (flu) viruses. Wild birds carry these flu viruses routinely and usually do not get sick from them. However, bird flu is very contagious can spread to domesticated birds, including chickens, ducks and turkeys, making them very sick and killing many of those infected.

Bird flu viruses do not usually infect humans, but several cases of human infection, including some deaths, have occurred since 1997.

The real danger is that a bird flu can mutate or change and once transmitted from birds to humans can then be transmitted from person to person. The last major avian flu epidemic in humans is believed to have occurred in 1918 when the virus rapidly spread to infect tens of millions of people world-wide with millions of resulting deaths. Human to human spread of this current avian virus has not occurred so far, but could occur anytime and result a worldwide epidemic.

What are the symptoms of Avian Flu?

Just like with any flu, there is an incubation period of a day or two before clinical symptoms occur. This is followed by rapidly progressing fever, malaise, and respiratory complications. Flu symptoms can last for five to seven days for those infected and full recovery can take several weeks.

Will Avian Flu affect the national blood supply?

Any ill person is not allowed to give blood and there has been no known transmission of flu by blood transfusions from donors who later developed flu. However, transmission is theoretically possible, but the risk from blood-borne infection is considered small.

The most likely outcome from a major flu epidemic is a decrease in the supply of blood because of a decrease in healthy donors and in staff to draw blood from donors. This may not be a major problem because routine blood use also will decrease with widespread illness from flu.

However, if the epidemic is very severe, life-threatening blood shortages could occur and emergency efforts (such as getting blood from other areas where there is little or no active flu infection) might need to be put in place to assure that patients get the blood they need.

The greatest impact on the blood supply will probably be among patients needing frequent transfusions of platelets (a blood cell fragment used to control bleeding in mostly cancer patients).

How are blood centers preparing to deal with Avian Flu?

The CDC has included blood collection, processing, testing and transfusion staff in a category of health care workers that will be given priority for vaccinations. ABC, AABB and the American Red Cross had emphasized to the CDC that in order to limit any disruptions to the blood supply, blood bank personnel should be given priority [for vaccinations].

In addition, if avian flu starts to spread, blood centers will increase local blood collections from healthy donors to stock up in preparation of possible shortages. The most common blood component given to patients (red blood cells) is usable for 42 days after it is collected and stocking up might help an area have sufficient blood supply during a major flu epidemic. Unfortunately, platelets are only good for 120 hours after they are drawn from a blood donor. So other emergency measures might be needed to help patients in need.

For more information, please visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/gen-info/facts.htm>.

Note: This information was supplied by America's Blood Centers (ABC) for its membership and for the general public. Revised/Updated 11-11-05