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Medical Focus - Avian Flu Essentials

December 15, 2005

"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."
– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Dear Colleague:

In the thirteenth letter in the Avian Flu Essentials series, I would like to discuss personal preparedness. There are many steps that an individual can take to prepare for natural disasters to ensure his family and his own personal safety. The scope of a pandemic would be so wide that local, state, and federal government would most likely become involved early throughout its progression. Nonetheless, individuals should undertake some preventive actions that can be very valuable prior to the arrival of assistance.

Staying informed will be the best way for people to gain an understanding of the avian flu and assess when it becomes a local imminent danger. A good place to refer to is the federal government's new website, *pandemicflu.gov*. Persons who are traveling to countries with extensive avian flu outbreaks should especially check the *Travel and Transportation* section. Contact with poultry should be minimized during their trip and they should monitor their health for ten days when returning to the United States for signs of illness.

Simple practices can reduce the likelihood of catching influenza such as hand washing, covering one's mouth when coughing, and staying three feet away from sick individuals. More importantly, people should get a regular flu shot. Although this will not protect them from an avian flu virus, it will prevent them from being concurrently infected with both regular and pandemic viruses. Therefore, the chance of reassortment between the two strains leading to a new virus would be decreased.

Developing a communication plan with your family is crucial as well. To begin this process, the Ready America website under the US Department of Homeland Security offers tips on *Creating a Family Plan*. Families with babies, the elderly, and people with disabilities can also check out the *Special Needs Items* section. Parents should discuss with their children how they will pick up their child at school in the event of a disaster or how to get in contact with each other shall they become separated. A good educational tool for children is also found at *www.fema.gov/kids/*.

Stocking up food for at least ten days is also recommended in case a physician advises you to stay at home during a flu illness. Purchasing water and nonperishable items is the most preferable.

A few other questions are answered on the reverse of this letter. I hope that when you go home today, you will begin formulating your own personal preparedness plan and share it with your family.

Sincerely,

Michael C. Burgess, M.D.
Member of Congress

Family Preparedness Links:

- www.pandemicflu.gov
- www.ready.gov
- www.fema.gov/kids/

Excerpt from Twin Cities St. Paul Pioneer Press, *Putting avian flu into perspective*, November 19, 2005

Do North American birds have avian flu? The disease hasn't arrived on our shores yet, but experts predict it probably will arrive here as early as the spring, when infected migrating birds on their way to the Arctic mix with North American birds.

Will that put humans at risk? Right now, the bird-flu virus doesn't move from bird to human easily, requiring very close contact with an infected bird, feces or blood. In Asia, most of the people who have become infected are those who have raised poultry, killed and plucked birds or worked closely with infected domestic or wild birds. For instance, in a few cases, handlers of fighting birds got sick after giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to an injured bird, notes Suresh Mittal, a Purdue University virology professor working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on a vaccine.

The disease also isn't very contagious among humans. There may be one case of a mother contracting the illness from her child, but it isn't clear if she was exposed by the child or a bird. At least 100 million birds likely have been infected, but there are just 121 documented cases of human infection, so the odds of catching flu from a bird are clearly very low.

Then why is everyone so worried? The worry isn't today's bird flu but what it might become tomorrow. We already know this flu is deadly, killing about half the people who catch it. The fear is that it will become more contagious, which could happen if it mutates or combines with a human virus. The risk is especially worrisome as infected birds migrate to Africa, where people live in close quarters with animals and a large percentage of the population has HIV, possibly making them more vulnerable. All of this increases the risk that bird flu will combine with a human virus, and once that happens, the disease will likely spread quickly.

So when should I start to worry? Right now, only isolated cases of avian flu have been reported. If a cluster of cases emerges, that suggests the virus has changed and has begun to spread by human contact. Once that happens, the virus could show up in the U.S. within two months, Mittal says.

Should we stop eating chicken and eggs? It is safe to eat cooked poultry and eggs. The risk of infection appears to come only from live birds as well as slaughtering and plucking birds and exposure to blood or feces. There are no reported cases of bird flu being transmitted through eggs, but even if the risk exists, the pasteurization process likely would kill the virus, as would cooking. Use common sense and protect cooking surfaces, cutting boards and counters from exposure to raw poultry and raw eggs, which also carry risk for salmonella.

Should I cancel plans to buy a pet bird? Most pet birds sold in the U.S. are bred here and haven't been exposed to avian flu. Imported canaries and finches are quarantined for a month under federal law; that is twice the time needed to detect bird flu. Retailers such as PetsMart quarantine birds for two extra weeks, so it is unlikely a sick bird would end up in a legitimate store. Don't buy birds from an individual or at a swap meet. And don't put your pet bird outside in a cage, as wild birds can steal food or leave droppings, putting the bird at risk, says PetsMart veterinarian Michael Staitman.

Will a flu shot lower the risk of bird flu? No. The vaccine developed for the current flu season battles an entirely different variety of flu. Two other flu drugs, amantadine and rimantadine, right now are ineffective against bird flu. Two antiviral drugs, Tamiflu and Relenza, might work to reduce symptoms of bird flu and shorten the duration of the illness. The prescription drugs must be taken within 48 hours of exposure.

Some panicked consumers are stocking up on the drugs, though the practice is discouraged. Improper use could render the drugs ineffective, plus they can't be used by everyone, says Marc Siegel, associate professor at New York University's School of Medicine and the author of "False Alarm: The Truth About the Epidemic of Fear."