

AVIAN INFLUENZA –

The Concern About People Getting the “Bird Flu” From Their Birds

What’s all the excitement about? There has been a lot of media coverage lately about the “Bird Flu” and the fear that this will be our next pandemic. And there has been concern here locally that people will get the Bird Flu from their chickens, turkeys and other types of poultry.

So what is the big deal? The deal is that the risk of the Asian Bird Flu (H5N1) could be the next pandemic in people is real. BUT – let’s step back and put the facts in order. Currently, the Asian avian influenza strain (H5N1) is not in the U.S. And there is a big difference in how commercial poultry are raised and how the public and animal health agencies operate in the U.S. compared to Asia.

Some facts on Avian Influenza (AI or Bird Flu):

- Chickens, ducks and other poultry do not spontaneously erupt with avian influenza. This is a virus, just like the human influenza viruses, that needs to be spread around to infect other birds. The spread is either through movement of the infected birds or movement of virus contaminated coops, equipment, vehicles, personnel clothing/boots, etc. that end up infecting new birds.
- All avian influenzas are not created equal. There are many strains of avian influenzas and the only one currently affecting people is the High-Path H5N1 strain. So at this moment in the U.S., there is probably some type of mild AI strain infecting poultry. It is not uncommon for the U.S. to see sporadic cases of Low-Path AI (H2, H3, H7) in poultry. Just because you hear that there is an AI outbreak in the U.S., it does not automatically mean it is the Asian H5N1 strain.
- Low-Path vs. High-Path – pathogenicity is the ability of an agent to produce disease in the host. Low-Path AI viruses produce none to moderate disease signs, including respiratory signs, egg production losses, with low death rate. High-Path AI viruses produce the more severe disease signs of respiratory, nervous, depression and a high death rate. As a Low-Path virus runs through flocks of birds it can mutate and become High-Path. Historically, this has occurred with H5 and H7 subtypes. The last large High-Path outbreak in the U.S. was H5N2 in 1983. So far, it is the High-Path types (H5 or H7) that have infected a small number of people and those people worked closely with infected poultry.

How would the Asian Bird Flu (H5N1) come to the U.S.? It could come through infected birds, either as smuggled birds or through wild migratory birds, or it could through an infected person. The U.S. automatically bans all shipments of birds coming from High-Path AI infected areas. We cannot stop the entry of wild fowl, but wildlife scientists are on location in Alaska doing surveillance on those migratory birds coming from Russia to see if they are carrying the Asian strain.

So if High-Path H5N1 gets into the U.S. through birds, what then? Even if the Asian AI strain gets into our wild migratory fowl, it would still have to get into our commercial poultry flocks – which is not an easy feat. Commercial poultry flocks are raised in confined housing to keep them protected from wild birds and disease prevention practices (biosecurity) are used routinely on the farm to keep out diseases. Biosecurity measures are the best weapons a poultry grower (commercial or backyard) has to keep avian influenza viruses away from their birds.

So what happens when a SC poultry flock gets infected with H5 or H7 AI viruses? All poultry states, including SC, are working on or updating their H5/H7 Avian Influenza Response Plans to detail the steps to follow to quickly contain an outbreak, which would include quarantines, surveillance zones, depopulation, disposal, cleaning & disinfecting and finally repopulation of the farm(s).

What type of poultry monitoring or surveillance is being done now? Avian Influenza has been a concern to the poultry industry long before the Asian strain appeared. Monitoring in the U.S. for all types of avian influenza is routine and will be continued. In SC, through the Clemson University Livestock Poultry Health, post-mortem examinations (necropsies) and AI blood testing is performed on commercial and backyard poultry. Surveillance is performed at state permitted livestock auctions that sell backyard poultry. The National Poultry Improvement Plan has had state monitoring programs for AI in poultry breeder flocks since 2000, and a new upcoming NPIP H5/H7 AI program to sample the commercial broiler, turkey and egg layer flocks.

What is your risk of getting the Bird Flu from your poultry? The risk is practically nil and will be no risk if High-Path AI is kept out of the U.S. and you follow Biosecurity steps to keep it out of your flock even if it does come (see www.clemson.edu/lph for Biosecurity steps). There is no danger of getting Bird Flu from properly cooked poultry meat and eggs.