WHAT IS AVIAN INFLUENZA?

The H5N1 virus (also called avian influenza) is an influenza A virus subtype that all birds can get – chickens, ducks, turkeys, quails, geese, and swans. Generally, avian flu viruses are divided into two groups based on their ability to cause disease: highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) virus spreads rapidly, may cause serious disease and result in high mortality rates (up to 100% within 48 hours), while low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI) can cause mild disease that may be undetected or show no symptoms at all in some species of birds. The H5N1 virus is a highly pathogenic type of avian flu, and has been detected in over 60 countries worldwide.

There are many ways avian influenza can spread. Even though you cannot see it, the H5N1 virus can live in the feces (droppings), saliva, mucous, and blood of infected birds. Anything that touches the infected poultry’s droppings, saliva, mucous or blood can carry the virus. This could be shoes, clothing, cages, egg bins, knives, cutting boards, or other tools. Droppings and mucous can also stick to the feathers and feet of poultry – even if you cannot see it – and the virus can be spread that way, too.

There are two main ways avian influenza can be prevented: through hygiene measures and distancing measures.

Hygiene-related activities include: cleaning up yards and coops daily to remove droppings; cleaning shoes and tires from bicycles or other vehicles before they enter the farm area; washing hands with soap and water before and after handling birds; cooking poultry and eggs well before eating them; and washing hands, knives, cutting boards and other tools with soap and water before and after preparing poultry for eating. Distancing measures include: protecting healthy poultry by quarantining new poultry for at least 14 days; not allowing poultry in the house or allowing children to play with poultry; keeping poultry in a closed building -- or in a cage or fenced-in area -- away from other animals.

The H5N1 virus does not usually infect people, but since November 2003, over 400 cases of human infection with highly pathogenic avian influenza viruses have been reported by over a dozen countries in Asia, Africa, the Pacific, Europe and the Near East. Most of these cases have occurred from direct or close contact with infected poultry or contaminated surfaces; however, a few cases of human-to-human spread of H5N1 virus have occurred.

Although the spread of H5N1 from person to person has been rare, limited and unsustainable, concern remains that the virus might mutate into a version that can spread easily from one person to another. If the H5N1 virus were to gain the capacity to spread easily from person to person, an influenza pandemic could begin. Although no one can predict when a pandemic might occur, experts from around the world are watching the H5N1 situation very closely and are preparing for the possibility of pandemic.