



## Bird flu in China

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Bird flu, also known as avian influenza, is a group of influenza viruses that affects birds. Some strains of bird flu occasionally infect humans, but generally they don't spread readily from one person to another.

Some bird flus cause a severe and often fatal illness, while some generally only cause mild symptoms.

In China there are now two strains of bird flu that have infected significant numbers of people, **influenza A(H7N9)** and **influenza A(H5N1)**. Other strains that have been reported in small numbers of people in China since 2013 are **A(H10N8)** and **A(H9N2)**.

### Bird flu A(H7N9)

This virus was first diagnosed in humans in March 2013. Since then over 350 people have been affected, and more than 110 have died. A few cases have been mild however most have suffered a severe illness. There is still a lot that is unknown about the virus and the illness.

So far all human cases of bird flu A(H7N9) have been infected in China - in Beijing, Shanghai, and the provinces of Anhui, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Hebei, Henan, Hunan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Jilin, Shandong and Zhejiang, but the virus may be present in birds or the environment in other areas. A few cases have been imported from mainland China into Hong Kong, Malaysia and Taiwan.

**In the winter of 2013/2014 there is a sharp increase in the number of cases occurring.** However at this time the illness does not transmit readily from one person to another. Most people appear to be getting their infections from contact with birds or live poultry markets. Birds infected with H7N9 do not show signs of illness.

### Bird flu A(H5N1)

This virus has infected over 600 people in 15 countries, including China, since it was first identified in humans in 1997. In addition, it has been found in wild birds and poultry in more than 60 countries.

The illness is mostly very severe, and causes death in about 60% of all those who are infected.

Within China, human cases have been reported from the provinces of Anhui, Fujian, Guizhou, Guangdong, Guangxi, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Liaoning, Shandong, Sichuan, Xinjiang and the municipalities of Beijing and Shanghai.

One case was imported into Canada from China in January 2014. The patient, who died, had been in Beijing. China's last confirmed case of H5N1 occurred in February 2014, in Guangxi province.

Most people infected have had contact with birds or live poultry markets. A few people have been infected through close, unprotected contact with a sick relative. Infected birds do show signs of being sick and die very quickly.

### Bird flu A(H10N8)

This strain was first detected in wild birds in 2007, and in live poultry markets in 2012. Globally, only three human cases have ever been reported – all in Jiangxi, China. The first was found in December 2013, and the latest in early February 2014. Two patients died, while the other is in a stable condition. Two of the patients had visited live poultry markets.

### Bird flu A(H9N2) – mild illness

A child in Hunan province was mildly ill in November 2013 and recovered. He had been in contact with poultry. Testing completed in January confirmed he had this rare bird flu. In December 2013, an elderly man from Shenzhen who had a cough and chills was diagnosed in Hong Kong with H9N2.

### What are the symptoms of bird flu?

Bird flu symptoms are similar to typical flu symptoms of fever and cough. People may have red, inflamed eyes (conjunctivitis), feel generally unwell and weak, have a sore throat and muscle aches. Sometimes there is headache, abdominal pain, chest pain and diarrhoea.

The H5N1, H7N9 and H10N8 strains can progress, often rapidly, to cause pneumonia with shortness of breath. This can lead to the failure of lungs and other organs, and death.

### How are people catching the bird flu?

It's currently unclear exactly how people are being infected. However most have visited live poultry markets, been involved in killing poultry and preparing them for consumption, or had other exposure to live birds or their environment. The droppings, secretions, blood, and organs of infected birds contain virus.

### Can people spread bird flu to others?

It may be possible to catch bird flu directly from someone who is sick with the disease. However at this time, it does not appear to be easily passed from one person to another.

### Why are authorities so concerned?

If these viruses start to spread easily between people, then a severe epidemic or pandemic (global epidemic) might occur. At this time there is no indication that this is imminent. Nevertheless, globally health authorities are increasing their efforts to identify suspected cases, and isolate, diagnose and treat them as early as possible.

### Can bird flu be treated?

Antiviral medications (Tamiflu / Relenza) have been shown to help treat bird flu A (H7N9) and A(H5N1).

### Is bird flu resistant to Tamiflu?

Whilst a few viruses that are tested may show resistance to Tamiflu, in general so far they do not appear to be. Guidance at this time is for all suspected, probable or



confirmed cases of bird flu to be treated with Tamiflu (or Relenza) as early as possible.

## Is there a vaccine?

No. At this stage, there is no commercially available vaccines for humans against bird flu.

Although a vaccine has been developed for people against A(H5N1), it is not available outside research studies.

## Are poultry and egg products safe to consume?

Any poultry or egg products should be thoroughly cooked before consumption. Once they are thoroughly cooked, there is no further risk. Avoid eating meat from animals that were diseased before their death.

Appropriate hygiene measures should be taken when handling frozen or raw poultry products. It is important to be careful in your kitchen – wash thoroughly any objects which touch the raw products, and sanitise kitchen surfaces. Wash hands frequently during food preparation.

## General advice

**You should avoid contact with birds and other animals, and their environment.**

- Do not go to live animal markets, poultry farms or pig farms.
- Do not handle any birds, even if they appear well. Prevent children from doing so.
- Avoid touching any surfaces that may be contaminated by bird droppings. Do not swim in any body of water that is used by birds.

**Always maintain high levels of personal hygiene.**

- Frequent hand washing is very important. Wash hands before and after food preparation and before eating.
- Thoroughly cook all poultry and poultry products, including eggs.

Consider having an influenza vaccination. Although it will not protect you against bird flu, it reduces your risk of a "co-infection" with human influenza.

## For more information or advice:

- Contact any International SOS Assistance Centre
- See the Medical Alert on the International SOS China Country Guide [www.internationalsos.com](http://www.internationalsos.com) and log in with your membership number
- Pandemic Information Service Members can also view the relevant pages of the Pandemic Preparedness website [www.internationalsos.com/pandemicpreparedness](http://www.internationalsos.com/pandemicpreparedness)
- Monitor the advice of local health authorities – they may be implementing screening of travellers returning from Shanghai or other affected areas

## Disclaimer

This information has been developed for educational purposes only. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Should you have questions or concerns about any topic described here, please consult your healthcare professional.