



Australian Chicken Meat
Federation (ACMF) Inc

Avian influenza and the Australian chicken meat industry

A guide for people working in the chicken meat
industry

February 5, 2007

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Current at 5 February 2007

Avian Influenza (“bird flu”) is an infectious disease of birds which has been found in some parts of Asia and Europe, attracting widespread media attention.

The Australian chicken meat industry has worked with the Australian government for some time on preparations for avian flu and planning for how we would respond if avian flu were to enter Australia. At present:

- As Australian chickens are **free from avian flu** there is no risk of catching it from birds.
- The World Health Organization says that while there have been rare cases of human to human transmission, there is no cause for alarm, as the virus has not spread beyond a first generation of close contacts.
- The Australian government is **well prepared for an outbreak** of avian flu in either birds or humans, with well-developed response plans in place.
- Our **biosecurity arrangements will be key** to keeping our birds healthy and isolated from other birds, both domesticated and wild. These are backed by the Australian government’s excellent record on quarantine and stringent disease control measures. (*what is “biosecurity?” – see p3*)

Does working in the poultry industry put me at risk of catching avian flu?

At present, as there is no avian flu in Australia, there is no risk to people in Australia, including anyone working in the poultry industry.

This includes people working with chicken and chicken meat, consumers, and members of the general public.

What is the concern about?

Avian flu is a common disease generally passed between birds, and occasionally to humans. The concern is that the avian flu virus may mutate, so that the virus can be passed from human to human.

The World Health Organization states that while there have been limited cases of human-to-human transmission of avian flu , there is no cause for alarm. Since the virus emerged in 2003, 270 people have been affected, most due to transmission from birds, and 164 have died.

However, authorities are concerned that should the H5N1 virus become more readily transmissible between humans, low human immunity and easy international travel could lead to a global influenza pandemic.

What does this have to do with chickens in Australia?

Poultry can contract avian flu, although ***there is no avian influenza in Australian poultry***. Past outbreaks of strains of avian flu (not H5N1) – the most recent was in Tamworth in 1997 – have been successfully eradicated from poultry. While it is possible for birds in Australia to contract it, stringent industry and government procedures to both avoid and manage an outbreak significantly reduce the chance that it will become a large scale problem.

Could working in the chicken meat industry place me at risk in the future?

For those in contact with live birds: Stringent biosecurity and veterinary procedures, together with personal protective equipment and hygiene procedures, are designed to reduce the chance of birds coming in contact with disease and minimise your exposure to birds.

Should any flock contract avian flu, it will be destroyed on-farm. Generally people aren't very susceptible to the virus, so the risk of catching avian flu from birds is very low: it happens only when infected birds and people are in very close contact. This is not the way poultry is managed in developed nations like Australia.

For those in processing: All birds on any farm found to have avian flu will be destroyed on-farm. This means that handling chicken meat will not increase your risk, as only healthy birds will go to normal processing.

For those in other roles: Like those involved in processing, those not in contact with live birds have no additional risk because of their employment.

If the virus arrives in Australia as a human to human strain, working with poultry will not be an issue as this strain of the disease will be carried by humans, not birds.

What precautions should I take?

It is important to always use any recommended personal protective equipment and follow any biosecurity or hygiene requirements at your site scrupulously.

What happens if chickens in Australia get avian flu?

All birds on that farm would be destroyed on-farm and disinfection and movement controls would be put into place under the supervision of the state agriculture department.

Should I be vaccinated?

The Australian Department of Health advises that as avian flu has not been reported in Australia in bird flocks at this time, people working in the chicken meat industries do not need to take any additional precautions at present, although a standard influenza vaccination may be advisable for those in contact with live birds.

The chicken meat industry will continue to monitor this and will take direction from the federal government. We will advise all staff immediately of any change to this.

What about my family?

The World Health Organization confirms that compared to the large number of birds that have contracted avian flu, very few people have contracted the disease from birds, and even less have caught it from another person. This means that any risk to your family is very small, and there is no cause for alarm.

What is “biosecurity”?

“Biosecurity” refers to a range of measures that keep our flocks from sources of transmissible disease. They may include measures such as keeping water supplies safe from other birds, controlling who goes on farm, controlling movement of birds between farms, restricting ownership of pet birds, proper clean out of sheds and showering before entering a farm.

What about chicken meat?

As avian flu is not a food-borne disease, it is safe to eat properly cooked chicken.

Of course, should there be an avian influenza outbreak among chickens, affected flocks would be isolated and destroyed on-farm. They would never be slaughtered for consumption.

What should I tell people who ask me about working in the chicken industry?

- The Australian chicken meat industry is free from avian flu.
- The industry has been involved with the government on the question of avian flu, and has contributed to planning and preparation in case there is an outbreak.
- There are measures in place to keep avian flu out of bird flocks, and any affected flock would be destroyed on farm – it would never go for human consumption.
- As always, proper cooking ensures chicken meat is safe to eat.

Where can I go for more information?

www.health.gov.au gives a comprehensive overview of avian flu and measures by the Australian government to prepare for and reduce any threat.

www.chicken.org.au is the Australian Chicken Meat Federation, the industry body representing Australian chicken growers.

BACKGROUND

Avian Influenza as a bird disease

Avian Influenza (or bird flu) is a viral disease which is generally spread by exotic birds and waterfowl. It's not a new phenomenon – it has been recorded in bird populations throughout history.

Like other flus, avian influenza can be unpredictable, as it mutates into different strains over time. Some strains induce relatively mild symptoms; others are more severe.

Like all birds, domesticated poultry such as chickens and turkeys can contract avian flu. As a safeguard, poultry producers in developed countries have robust biosecurity on all chicken farms and associated operations in place to guard against diseases where possible.

Global concern focuses around a strain of avian flu known as **H5N1**.

What is the risk in chickens in Australia?

Australia's "island" status, the high standards set by AQIS (Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service) and industry's biosecurity measures provide significant protection against disease entering local flocks.

For this reason, Australian chickens are generally relatively disease free compared to other developed nations. There have been outbreaks of avian flu in Australia in the past (not H5N1) – the most recent was in Tamworth in 1997 – but the disease has been successfully eradicated from poultry flocks.

How could an AI outbreak occur on a poultry farm?

Avian influenza viruses are often found in wild birds, particularly ducks. Ducks aren't affected by the virus but can spread infection across wide geographic areas as they migrate. Infections are most likely spread from wild to domesticated birds either through direct contact or through contact with a flock's water supply. For this reason, biosecurity measures are the primary defence against the introduction of the disease into poultry farms.

Good biosecurity aims to maintain a barrier between bird populations; in this instance, domestic and wild bird populations, to prevent disease being transmitted. This is the single most important factor in reducing the risk of an avian flu outbreak among chickens. As well as preventing contact between wild and domestic birds, the water supply must be either treated, or from a known safe source.

How is avian influenza transmitted between birds?

Avian influenza is transmitted through transfer of the virus, either directly between birds, or through the faeces of sick birds contaminating other birds through waterways or dust.

If avian flu is transmitted to humans from birds, can it be transmitted to other people?

The World Health Organization (WHO) has said that although rare instances of limited human-to-human transmission of H5N1 and other avian influenza viruses have occurred in association with outbreaks in poultry, they should not be a cause for alarm. The virus has not spread beyond a first generation of close contacts or caused illness in the general community, and data from these incidents suggest that transmission requires very close contact with an ill person.

Is Australia prepared for an avian influenza outbreak in poultry?

YES. There is an elaborate emergency animal disease response plan in place which sets out clearly how industry and state and federal governments would act to isolate farms with the disease and eliminate it while ensuring no further spread occurs. Details are available on www.outbreak.gov.au.

What more is being done?

A range of specialised preparatory events have taken place since February 2005 to look at specific aspects involved in an emergency response.

To test the agricultural and health systems in place, a major national simulation of an avian influenza outbreak, named Eleusis '05, took place over three days in November 2005. The chicken meat industry was involved in this exercise.

BACKGROUND

Avian Flu as a possible disease in humans

In late 2003, a strain of avian flu referred to as **H5N1** reemerged in Asia. It is of interest to the poultry and medical communities as it can infect people in close contact with infected exotic or domestic birds.

As at January 29, 2007, 270 people have been affected and 164 have died. The World Health Organization says this is a small number compared with the number of birds affected and the numerous associated opportunities for human exposure, especially in areas where backyard flocks are common.

What would happen if the virus gained the ability to move more readily from human to human?

As avian flu rests in the lower respiratory system, it is harder to spread than common flu (which invades the upper respiratory system and is easily spread by coughing and sneezing). However because humans would have little immunity to this new virus, human disease could spread relatively quickly, potentially in several countries at once. This is called a “pandemic”.

The World Health Organization has plans in place to contain the spread of infection, including strict quarantine and treatments for victims and their known contacts.

Should avian flu spread from person to person, the Australian government will implement the Australian Action Plan for Pandemic Influenza, which gives direction for actions by Australian governments and emergency services.

Could an influenza pandemic originate in Australia?

Our quarantine and biosecurity procedures make this unlikely. The most likely scenario for the introduction of an influenza pandemic would be through people travelling to Australia.

In this scenario, the medical community would take the lead in managing the situation. As chicken would not be a risk factor, our industry would play no special role in its control. However, we would work with government agencies to manage any consumer misperceptions about chicken meat.

Are people working in the poultry industry more likely to get infected?

No. Once the virus has mutated into a form that is transmitted from person to person, birds are no longer the carrier. Working with poultry during a human pandemic does not increase risk.

Is Australia prepared for an influenza pandemic?

YES. The Australian Department of Health has brought together government, agriculture, industry and the medical community to develop a detailed action plan – see www.health.gov.au.