

UPDATE: Avian (Bird) Flu

In January 2009 the Ministry of Health in China announced three new confirmed human cases of the bird flu. The bird flu has been a concern in Asia for the past several years for several reasons which include:

- Growing number of cases of human infection and mortality;
- Lack of immunity in humans to the avian influenza A virus;
- Possible genetic mutation which could lead to human-to-human transmission starting of an epidemic;
- Lack of a vaccine at this time;
- The fact that Asia has the largest quantity of poultry of all continents;
- Migration of both birds and people adding to the necessity of public health vigilance.

At Parkway, we are aware of this important issue and have been keeping abreast of the news. In order to answer some of the more common questions asked by our patients, we have put together the following list of commonly asked questions and answers.

What causes bird flu?

-A type of influenza A virus.

How does one get infected by the bird flu virus?

-By exposure to contaminated poultry. China has the world's largest poultry population making this country a vital center for the control of a potential epidemic. No human to human transmission has been documented, but that is a possibility as the virus mutates.

Has there ever been a bird flu epidemic?

-No. Since 2003 the World Health Organization (WHO) documented 400 cases of bird flu. The reason for concern, as noted above, is the potential epidemic that could happen in the case of a mutation.

What is the present situation in China?

-To date, China has confirmed 37 cases of bird flu since 2003. Of these reported cases, 25 have resulted in death.¹

How does one prevent bird flu?

-Like any other virus, personal hygiene is paramount. Any handling of poultry should be followed by thorough hand-washing. Exposure to living fowl is also a source of the virus so beware of close contact with live birds in parks, zoos and during wilderness trips.

How does the bird flu compare with common influenza?

-Presently in the US an estimated 30-50 thousand deaths a year occur because of the common flu. They are usually the very young or the elderly. As one can see, the common flu is a much greater problem than the bird flu making immunization very important.

Is there a vaccine against the bird flu?

-A vaccine may soon become available. At present, it is not.

Additional information can be found at the CDC and WHO websites

¹ http://www.who.int/csr/don/2009_01_27/en/index.html