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COMMERCIAL EGG TIP . . .

AVIAN INFLUENZA FACTS

Outbreaks of a highly pathogenic avian influenza in Southeast Asia and the transmission of this disease to a few humans there have resulted in a great deal of coverage by the media. Avian influenza is a serious respiratory disease of poultry caused by a virus. Although it is a disease that all poultry producing countries should be concerned about, it is a long way from being a serious health threat for humans. The following are some facts regarding this disease of poultry:

How serious is Avian Influenza? There are several different types of avian influenza. The milder forms occur occasionally around the world and are referred to as Low Pathogenic Avian Influenza (LPAI). The more serious form is known as Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) because the disease is much more serious in birds and can result in high rates of mortality in flocks. The type now occurring in Southeast Asia is an HPAI form referred to as H5N1. The H5N1 form of this virus has never been present in the United States.

Can humans get H5N1 from poultry? In some cases the answer is yes. A small number of people in Southeast Asia have developed a human form of this disease. Nearly all cases have resulted from very close contact with infected poultry. It is typical for individuals in Southeast Asia to allow poultry to run free in villages and for flock owners to live in very close contact to their birds. Nearly all the cases of human influenza have resulted from this type of very close contact between humans and birds.

Can humans get avian influenza from other humans? It is possible for a human to acquire the H5N1 virus from another human if there is extremely close contact. However, the virus has yet to develop the ability to easily pass from human to human and this type of transmission is extremely rare. Millions of infected chickens and other birds have been culled by workers with no ill effects.

Can you get avian influenza by eating or handling poultry meat? There is no danger of acquiring avian influenza from properly cooked food. Like all types of viruses, the avian influenza virus is destroyed by the heat of cooking. No chickens or turkeys known or suspected of having avian influenza are processed for sale in the United States. Washing hands after handling raw poultry is always a good idea, but there is virtually no chance of encountering avian influenza infected meat.

PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK

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Do we have avian influenza in the United States. We have never had an outbreak of Asian-type H5N1 influenza in the United States. We have had low pathogenic forms as recently as 2004. The last confirmed outbreak of H5N2 (not H5N1) highly pathogenic avian influenza in the United States was in Pennsylvania in 1983 and 1984. No known human illness or infections resulted from this outbreak of avian influenza.

What if there is an outbreak in Georgia. The policy of the poultry industry and the government is to eradicate the disease as quickly as possible by destroying all flocks in which the H5 or H7 types of the virus are found. Georgia Poultry Laboratory veterinarians are routinely blood testing flocks of birds in Georgia to hopefully achieve an early detection should avian influenza be present in the state. Should a positive diagnosis occur, the poultry industry, Georgia Department of Agriculture and veterinarians from the Georgia Poultry Laboratory System will work together in order to quickly and effectively respond to any outbreak of avian influenza. All birds in infected flocks will be destroyed to prevent the virus from spreading and evolving into highly pathogenic forms.

Is it true that intensive production practices used in the United States contributes to the development of this disease? The intensive, enclosed housing systems used in the United States are actually more protective of birds and their health than the open ranging systems used in other countries. This is because of the improvements in housing, selective breeding for disease resistance, protection from potential disease carriers such as wild birds and the continuous health oversight by poultry veterinarians and flock managers.

What should be done to protect flocks and prevent the spread of disease? Poultry companies and flock owners should practice strict bio-security at all times. This will be heightened should there be an outbreak of avian influenza in Georgia. During an outbreak, trucks carrying feed will be washed down, personnel will wear protective clothing and plastic boots and go through footbaths. Farmers will generally keep their farms off limits to unnecessary traffic and will avoid community gatherings until the problem has passed. The eradication efforts in other states in recent years have resembled military operations in their scope and precision.

Although we do not have the H5N1 type of avian influenza in the United States, it is important to be vigilant and prepared to respond to any outbreak of avian influenza should it occur. The possibility of humans contracting avian influenza should an outbreak occur is remote, but the potential economic consequences for poultry producers is large. Thus, we will remain vigilant in the United States and respond swiftly to any positive diagnosis of avian influenza.



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Consult with your poultry company representative before making management changes.

“Your local County Extension Agent is a source of more information on this subject