

19 October 2005

H5N1 Avian influenza – ECDC key messages

Context

- ECDC is a new EU agency: it started work in May this year
- The Centre's mandate is to reinforce Europe's defences against infectious diseases by pooling Europe's health knowledge and fostering cooperation between national public health authorities across the continent.
- Following confirmation on Thursday, 13 October, that H5N1 high pathogenic avian influenza had been found in Turkey, and was suspected in Romania, EU Health and Consumer Protection Commissioner, Markos Kyprianou, asked ECDC to advise on:
 - Precautions that travellers to Turkey, Romania and other countries with H5N1 should take
 - Protective measures for workers involved in culling poultry infected with H5N1 avian influenza, and other people who may come into close contact with infected birds
- Because of heightened public concern about the threat to human health that H5N1 may pose this advice had to be produced quickly, while respecting principles of good scientific practice
- Draft advice on both of the points requested by Commissioner Kyprianou was circulated by ECDC to the European Commission and to national public health authorities across Europe on Friday 14 October. ECDC also produced a general assessment of the risk to human health posed by the presence of H5N1 in Europe
- Intensive scientific consultations have taken place between ECDC, the Commission and national public health authorities on Monday and Tuesday this week.
- What follows represents the views of the ECDC informed by its consultations with the European Commission and Member State public health authorities

ECDC Assessment of the risk to human health: low and focused on certain sub-populations

- The H5N1 bird flu virus in its present form poses a very low risk to human health
- Reported transmission of the virus from birds to humans has so far been extremely rare:
 - Some 150 million birds have died, or been culled, due to H5N1 bird flu in south-east Asia.
 - Many hundreds of thousands - perhaps millions - of people in Asia have been exposed to the H5N1 avian influenza, yet there have been only around 120 people known to have actually caught the virus.

- The risk of infection for most people in Europe is close to zero
- Human cases of H5N1 bird flu in Asia are almost entirely among people who have had close contact with infected poultry
- The people in Europe who are at most risk of infection with H5N1 are:
 - Workers involved in culling infected poultry flocks
 - People who work, or live, on poultry farms **in regions affected by H5N1**
 - People who keep poultry **in regions affected by H5N1**
- The risk to these groups, while low, is still a matter for concern. Of the 120 people infected with H5N1 bird flu in Asia 60 have died from the virus.
- Protecting these at risk groups in Europe from H5N1 is a priority
- ECDC is concerned that a perception seems to be building in some quarters that the arrival of H5N1 bird flu in Europe signals the start of a human influenza pandemic.
- ECDC's view is that the health threat posed by bird flu and the issue of preparedness against a possible pandemic of human flu should be kept separate:
 - The immediate health risk posed by H5N1 bird flu is low and focused on a specific sub-population –i.e. people likely to be in close contact with infected poultry
 - While a pandemic of human influenza is probably inevitable it may not come for several years, and it may not be caused by H5N1 bird flu. There are plenty of other candidate viruses out there, such as for example horse and dog flu strains currently circulating in north America or various existing human flu strains

ECDC guidelines on protective measures for at risk groups

- ECDC today (19 October) issued guidelines on the protection of at risk groups from H5N1 avian influenza
- The guidelines apply **only** to the at risk groups such as cullers and people in regions affected by H5N1 who work, or live, on poultry farms or who keep poultry. **They do not apply to the population at large.** Advice to the general public is given in the next section.
- Protection is based on the application of the following six principles:
 1. Control infection in birds
 2. Minimise the number of people possibly exposed to the virus – as far as possible separating people from the avian viruses and potentially infected birds and animals
 3. Proper use of personal protective equipment for those directly involved in the work with potentially infected animals
 4. Proper but controlled limited use of antiviral drugs following a local risk assessment
 5. Recommending seasonal influenza vaccination for people involved in culling infected poultry flocks, especially if seasonal influenza is circulating
 6. Careful surveillance for infection among those potentially exposed

- Some of what this means in practice is that:
 - The minimum number of people necessary should be involved in bird culling
 - Farm workers not directly involved in culling activities, and other people living on farms in regions where H5N1 is present, should avoid exposure to known or potential sources of avian influenza virus (i.e. avoiding contact with chicken, ducks and other poultry unless absolutely necessary).
 - In some cases, restrictions on the movements of people into and out of infected areas may need to be considered
 - Cullers should wear face masks, eye protection, gloves and protective suits
 - Cullers should follow a decontamination procedure when taking off their protective equipment
- In some cases, culling teams may need to be given course of anti-viral drugs to protect them against infection.
- Cullers should be vaccinated against seasonal influenza.
 - The reason for vaccinating culler is to minimise the chances of a person being simultaneously infected with H5N1 bird flu and ordinary human flu
 - While the chances of someone being infected with both types of flu simultaneously are, statistically, very very low the consequences could be potentially disastrous – the emergence of the much feared human pandemic flu strain.
 - Eliminating this risk is the reason for giving culler the seasonal flu jab. It should be understood, though, that the seasonal flu vaccination does not protect against H5N1 bird flu.
- The health of these at risk groups must be constantly monitored so that any human cases of H5N1 bird flu can be instantly identified and treated.

Precautions for other members of the public

- The level of risk for people who are not in one of the at risk groups is very, very low.
- The risk becomes almost non-existent if the following precautions are followed:
 - If you come across any dead or sick birds, **do not touch them.**
 - Ensure that poultry meat and eggs are thoroughly cooked.
 - It is highly unlikely that H5N1 can be passed on to humans by raw meat or eggs, but if you cook your food properly this will eliminate the risk entirely. It will also protect you from salmonella and other organisms that cause food poisoning.

Precautions for people travelling to regions where the H5N1 virus has been found

- People do not need to change their travel plans because of the presence of H5N1 in Turkey, Romania and possibly other countries around Europe
- Visitors to regions where H5N1 bird flu has been found run almost no risk of catching the virus, provided they follow the general precautions for the public outlined above.
- The only additional precautions visitors to H5N1 infected regions should take are to:

- Avoid visiting poultry farms and bird markets
- Comply with any advice and instructions issued by the national authorities in the country concerned

Next Steps

- ECDC has sent its risk assessment, its guidelines on protection of at risk group, its advice to people travelling to affected regions and a “frequently asked questions” document (FAQ) document to the European Commission and to the national public health authorities across Europe
- All of these document have also been published today (19 October) on ECDC’s website (www.ecdc.eu.int)
- ECDC will continue to closely monitor the human health implications of the presence of H5N1 bird flu in Europe and internationally. ECDC will be publishing weekly bulletins about the situation on its website.

Further information:

For the full texts of the documents see <http://www.ecdc.eu.int>

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