

Bird Flu Hasn't Landed—Yet

What you need to know about pandemic hype

February 16, 2006 By Kirk Johnson, PhD

Hooked on Hollywood thrillers? Here's a spicy little plotline: A virus found in foreign birds suddenly starts infecting humans and spreading from country to country. Some experts think avian (bird) flu could ignite a worldwide pandemic in much this way. For black people, who make up a large percentage of poultry-plant workers in the U.S., the threat would be high.

But three conditions must be met before you have a global disease outbreak, says Christine Pearson of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "You need a novel virus" for which people have little or no immunity. It has to infect humans easily. And it has to spread easily from person to person.

The good news is, bird flu doesn't meet the last two requirements. "There are a few cases in Asia where it has spread from one household member to another, but they're rare," Pearson says. Moreover, only those who work directly with infected birds are now at risk, and there are no signs of the virus among U.S. birds.

What isn't known is the virus' potential to mutate into a form that could be transmitted from human to human. In 1968, a flu pandemic claimed 700,000 deaths worldwide—33,800 in the U.S. Experts say another flu pandemic is inevitable, though no one knows how lethal it will be or when it will hit. When it does, it could take six months or more to develop, test and produce a vaccine. (Human safety tests on one experimental vaccine are underway.) By the time an effective vaccine is ready, even Uncle Sam admits that a pandemic could swamp limited hospital beds and medicines.

And that worries Rep. Donna M. Christensen (D-Virgin Islands), chair of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) Health Braintrust and the first female doctor elected to Congress. The health care system, she argues, often fails to meet poor people's needs in a crisis. "We saw this after Hurricane Katrina," she says, adding that while black people aren't the only group vulnerable to avian flu, they are disproportionately poor. Christensen says that protecting African Americans from avian flu isn't that different from reducing diabetes, stroke or cancer risks. "Expand access to quality health care, rebuild the health infrastructure and reduce—and ideally eliminate—racial, ethnic and rural health disparities"—all issues on which the CBC has introduced legislation.

For advice from federal and international authorities, visit www.cdc.gov/flu/avian. Travelers to areas with confirmed human cases (Asia and Turkey) can check www.pandemicflu.gov.

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