

Travel Guard® Health Advisory

H5N1 Virus

H5N1 is a sub-type of the species Influenza A virus, which is also referred to as bird flu virus. It is a virus that is highly contagious among birds. Humans who come into contact with sick birds are more likely to get the virus. It can lead to respiratory illness and can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. Although human infections with this virus are rare, approximately 60% of those who have been infected have died.

How is it transmitted?

People become infected by touching objects that were contaminated with the virus and then transferring it to themselves by touching their mouth or nose. Almost all cases of H5N1 infection in people have been closely linked to close contact with infected live or dead birds. H5N1 infection in humans can cause severe disease and has a high mortality rate. If the H5N1 virus were to change and become more easily transmissible from person to person while retaining its capacity to cause severe disease, the consequences for public health could be very serious.

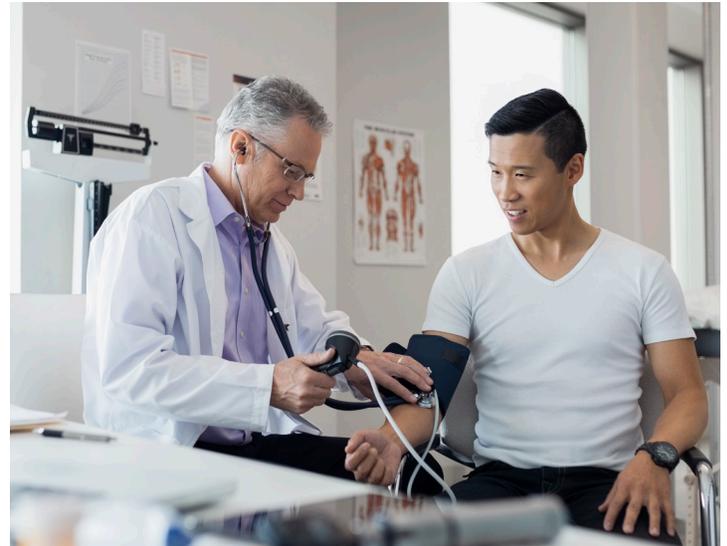
Signs and symptoms

The classic signs and symptoms of influenza are expected to be detectable in the new H5N1 influenza infection. The classical clinical feature is an acute febrile illness with respiratory signs and symptoms. Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) virus infections in people have been associated with a wide range of illness from conjunctivitis only, to influenza-like illness, to severe respiratory illness (e.g., shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, acute respiratory distress, viral pneumonia, respiratory failure) with multi-organ disease, sometimes accompanied by nausea, abdominal pain, diarrhea, vomiting and sometimes neurologic symptoms.

Treatment

As an emerging infectious disease, it is difficult to manage infected patients. Since there is limited knowledge, the treatment is usually supportive. However, as a member of the influenza family, the management of the case can be based on the general treatment of influenza. Antiviral drugs for the influenza virus infection are currently available. In addition, the management of influenza should also include symptomatic and supportive management. This is the basic requirement in clinical management of influenza.

The most used antiviral medication at present is Oseltamivir. This is the antiviral drug used for the management of classical influenza infection. It is also used for the management of patients with the new atypical influenza infection. However, the common problem is the unknown effectiveness of the drug.



Prevention

Vaccines are used for disease control and prevention. The United States federal government maintains a stockpile of H5N1 vaccine. The stockpiled vaccine could be used if a H5N1 virus begins transmitting easily from person to person. However, some evidence of antiviral resistance has been reported in HPAI Asian H5N1 viruses and influenza A H7N9 viruses isolated from some human cases. Monitoring for antiviral resistance among avian influenza A viruses is crucial and ongoing.

Apart from the use of vaccine, the basic prevention measures towards H5N1 influenza infection should not be forgotten. Basic sanitation is important for prevention of any new emerging influenza infection. Preventive measures are as follows:

- Avoid contact with people who are sick or may have been exposed to the flu.
- Avoid direct contact with poultry and birds or their droppings.
- Consume only thoroughly cooked poultry and eggs.
- Limit contact with others while you are sick.
- Avoid large crowds if there is a flu outbreak.
- Avoid visiting live poultry markets and live bird markets.
- Refrain from touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Wash your hands frequently.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and throw away used tissues in the trash.

Flu Vaccine

Consult with your physician to see if he or she recommends a yearly flu vaccination, which protects against common viruses. Vaccinations of high-risk persons are especially important to reduce their risk of severe flu illness. It is also important for healthcare workers, and other people who live with or care for high risk people, to keep from spreading flu to high risk individuals. Children younger than six months are at high risk of serious flu illness, but are too young to be vaccinated. People who care for them should be vaccinated instead.

References

- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/virus-transmission.htm)
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- [World Health Organization, WHO](http://www.who.int/influenza/human_animal_interface/avian_influenza/h5n1_research/faqs/en/)
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