Avian (Bird) Flu—What You need to Know

What happens during a normal flu season

- Every year, from December to April, we have the appearance of influenza. To prevent the flu, everyone is advised to protect themselves and get a flu shot, when available.
- When a novel influenza virus appears, it is capable of being spread from person to person, and shows up in many countries at the same time—we have a pandemic.

Avian Flu—what’s all the fuss about?

- Avian influenza (also known as bird flu or H5N1) viruses usually do not infect humans, however several cases of human infections have been reported since 1997.
- These cases resulted from direct contact with infected poultry or migrating birds.
- There is no known human to human spread of H5N1.
- There is a concern that the virus could mutate and become more contagious in humans. This could start a global flu pandemic; however there is no immediate threat of a flu pandemic in the United States at this time.

Will there be a vaccine to prevent pandemic flu?

- Scientists are working now to develop a vaccine for the H5N1, however the H5N1 virus may or may not end up causing a pandemic.
- Flu vaccines have to be made specifically for a particular strain of the flu virus. That’s why the vaccine for “regular” flu has to be changed each year, because the virus also changes from year to year.
- The current influenza vaccine does not protect people from avian (bird) flu.
- When a new virus appears, it takes a year or two before a vaccine can be made against it.

What about storing up on Tamiflu or another antiviral medication?

- We are urging people not to do that for the following reasons:
  - There is a limited supply of antiviral drugs.
  - To help ensure that antivirals are available for those most in need, public health workers and health care providers must be in a position to manage available supplies of these drugs. That won’t be possible if they are being stockpiled by private individuals.
  - Indiscriminate and inappropriate use of Tamiflu may promote the development and spread of resistance to this important drug among influenza viruses.

How can I protect myself?

- Make sure to get your annual flu shot. This won’t protect you against avian influenza, but it will protect you against “regular” flu likely to be around this year. It is never too late to get your flu shot.
- Cover your cough with your sleeve or a tissue.
- Make sure to wash your hands frequently when you are sick, and after coughing.
- Stay home from work or school and avoid crowded places (like the grocery store) when you are sick.
- Improve your overall health by eating nutritious foods, being physically active and avoiding tobacco. The healthier you are, the more resistant your body is to disease.