

Saint Mary's Health and Wellness asks,  
*did you know?*

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## FLU NEWS

In recent media there has been frequent mention of bird flu (avian influenza) and a flu pandemic. In an attempt to keep the Saint Mary's College community informed, Health and Wellness Services is going to address FLU NEWS in the next few *Did You Know?* publications.

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Our second in the series:

### Avian Influenza or Bird Flu

Avian influenza, commonly called bird flu, is a bird disease caused by a virus. It is usually a mild disease. Poultry are routinely tested for avian influenza in an effort to quickly diagnose the disease and prevent its spread.

***Who can get the virus?*** The virus can occur naturally in some wild migratory water birds, such as ducks and geese, which do not get sick from the virus but can carry it to other birds. Domestic poultry such as chickens and turkeys can get bird flu. These bird viruses pose no serious threat to human health. Since December 2003, avian influenza A (H5N1) infections in animals have been reported in Asia, Africa, the Pacific, Europe, and the Near East. View the update on avian influenza in animals from the World Organization for Animal Health Web site.

***Are there more serious forms of bird flu?*** Yes, there are certain types of bird flu viruses that can cause a very serious disease in birds. These are called highly pathogenic or HP forms of the virus. These viruses are often fatal to birds and can spread rapidly. They are a serious threat to the health of poultry.

***Are these serious forms of the virus common?*** There have only been three highly pathogenic (HP) avian influenza outbreaks in the U.S. – in 1924, 1983 and 2004. Each time the outbreak was quickly detected, contained and eradicated. However, there is an HP form of the virus called H5N1 that has become a serious concern. H5N1 is rapidly spreading from Asia to Europe and Africa, and usual methods for eliminating the spread of bird flu are not working.

***Can people get the flu from HP forms of the virus?*** Although bird flu viruses do not usually infect people, the H5N1 form has caused illnesses in some people who have had close and direct contact with diseased birds. The spread of the disease from one person to another has been very rare, and has never gone beyond one person. Since January 2004, the World Health Organization (WHO) has reported human cases of avian influenza A (H5N1) in Asia, Africa, the Pacific, Europe, and the Near East. Cumulative number of confirmed human cases of avian influenza A (H5N1) are available on the WHO Avian Influenza website.

***Will we get the H5N1 bird virus in this country?*** Because the virus can be spread by wild migratory birds, it is very possible that poultry in the U.S. will get the H5N1 virus. A finding of H5N1 in birds is NOT a pandemic. The H5N1 virus does not easily spread from birds to humans.

***Can people get H5N1 from eating poultry or eggs?*** People cannot get bird flu from eating properly handled and cooked food.

***Advice to travelers:*** Travelers to areas affected by avian influenza in birds are not considered to be at elevated risk of infection unless direct and un-protected exposure to infected birds (including feathers, feces and under-cooked meat and egg products) occurs. WHO continues to recommend that travelers to affected areas should avoid contact with live animal markets and poultry farms, and any free-ranging or caged poultry. Large amounts of the virus are known to be excreted in the droppings from infected birds. Populations in affected countries are advised to avoid contact with dead migratory birds or wild birds showing signs of disease.

Direct contact with infected poultry, or surfaces and objects contaminated by their droppings, is considered the main route of human infection. Exposure risk is considered highest during slaughter, de-feathering, butchering, and preparation of poultry for cooking. There is no evidence that properly cooked poultry or poultry products can be a source of infection.

**Food Safety Tips:**

- Wash hands thoroughly before and after handling food.
- Keep raw poultry and its juices separate from other foods.
- Wash utensils and surfaces with hot, soapy water, including countertops and cutting boards.
- Use a food thermometer to be sure poultry is cooked to an internal temperature of at least 165 degrees F. This will destroy viruses and other bacteria. Eggs should be cooked until both the yellow and white parts are firm.