It is currently winter season and the “flu” is on everyone’s minds. So what about this “avian bird flu” that people keep hearing about? Is it a human or food safety risk? Well, not for individuals in the United States where it has not yet stricken birds or people.

The variant of avian influenza (Bird flu) that has affected people (avian influenza A, H5N1) has been extremely troublesome in Asia and Europe as it is highly contagious among poultry. Since 2003, outbreaks of avian influenza H5N1 occurred among poultry in Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, Tibet, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Russia, Turkey, Romania and the Ukraine, resulting in disease deaths or controlled killing of more than 100 million birds.

What has been worrisome is that it has also been found among migratory (wild) birds in China, Croatia, Mongolia and Romania, presenting a mechanism for uncontrolled spread to countries where it has not yet been a problem.

Although highly contagious among birds and poultry, it is not as contagious for humans, but contact 

Food Safety Notes

- Conventional cooking (temperatures at or above 70°C in all parts of a food item) will inactivate the H5N1 virus. Properly cooked poultry meat is, therefore, safe to consume.
- The H5N1 virus, if present in poultry meat, is not killed by refrigeration or freezing.
- Home slaughtering and preparation of sick or dead poultry for food is hazardous: this practice must be stopped.
- Eggs can contain H5N1 virus both on the outside (shell) and the inside (whites and yolk). Eggs from areas with H5N1 outbreaks in poultry should not be consumed raw or partially cooked (runny yolk); uncooked eggs should not be used in foods that will not be cooked, baked or heat-treated in other ways.
- There is no epidemiological evidence to indicate that people have been infected with the H5N1 virus following consumption of properly cooked poultry or eggs.
- The greatest risk of exposure to the virus is through the handling and slaughter of live infected poultry. Good hygiene practices are essential during slaughter and post-slaughter handling to prevent exposure via raw poultry meat or cross contamination from poultry to other foods, food preparation surfaces or equipment.

[taken from INFOSAN (WHO) information note, Nov. 2005]
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with infected birds or their secretions can present a risk of infection. As of the first week of January 2006, avian influenza H5N1 has affected people in Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and Turkey.

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and individual state health authorities are keeping a keen eye for entry in the United States. The CDC reports that there is no commercially available vaccine that can protect against the avian flu H5N1 that has affected people in Asia, but there are developmental studies and clinical trials currently underway since mid-2005 to address this issue.

If anyone is about to travel to the afflicted countries, individuals may want to read up on how to best protect themselves against this new threatening pandemic that many may take for granted in the United States.