

State of Alaska  
**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES**

**Sarah Palin, Governor**

**Karleen K. Jackson**  
Commissioner  
P.O. Box 110601  
Juneau, Alaska 99811-0601

**FACT SHEET**



**Sherry Hill**  
Communications Officer  
/Legislative Liaison  
**907-465-1618**

**FAX: 907-465-3068**  
[www.hss.state.ak.us](http://www.hss.state.ak.us)

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Contact: Greg Wilkinson, (907) 269-7285, Cell (907) 382-7032  
Jeff Kasper, (907) 465-8194, Cell (907) 321-3158

## **Flu, bird flu, and flu pandemics**

### *Information about bird flu for Alaskans*

**Influenza (flu) viruses** are a group of viruses that primarily infect birds, but also can infect and cause illness in mammals, including pigs, horses and humans. Influenza has probably existed in mammals and birds since ancient times.

**Flu epidemics** occur every year or two, when a flu virus undergoes a small genetic change, just enough that many people are susceptible to infection. Severe illness resulting in death during annual influenza epidemics is most common among the elderly and persons with underlying medical conditions.

**Flu pandemics** occur when there is a major change in the genetic make up of the virus. All humans are susceptible, attack rates are high and mortality rates may be high as well. Influenza pandemics spread rapidly and can travel around the world in only a few months.

**Bird flu** (avian influenza) is a contagious disease of birds, but it may occasionally cause disease in other animals, including humans. The current outbreak of the H5N1 bird flu virus is the most severe outbreak in poultry ever recorded and is unusual in the severity of illness it causes in humans.

### **Bird flu risks to people**

Although bird flu infection among humans from infected poultry is rare, and usually results in mild disease, the resulting disease from the current strain of H5N1 is severe.

**Symptoms** of bird flu in humans have ranged from typical flu-like symptoms to pneumonia and other severe and life-threatening complications.

### **Bird flu prevention and treatment**

Studies suggest that the certain prescription medicines approved for human flu viruses would work in preventing bird flu infection in humans. Currently, there is no widely available vaccine to protect humans against the H5N1 bird flu virus that is being seen in Asia. However, vaccine development efforts are under way.

The H5N1 bird flu virus is resistant to some antiviral medications. However, two antiviral medications, oseltamavir (Tamiflu®) and zanamavir, are being used to treat flu caused by the H5N1 virus.