

# Preparing for Threat of Bird Flu Should Be Top Health Priority, Says New Report

By ACSH Staff — March 9, 2006

**“It is wise to be prepared for the small but real possibility...of such a pandemic.”**

—Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, ACSH

March 15, 2006 -- New York, New York. The toll in human lives from avian influenza (or “bird flu”) is so far relatively small, and a global pandemic probably will not occur -- but the potential consequences of such a pandemic are so devastating that preparations are nonetheless a high priority.

That is one of the lessons to be drawn from an accessible overview of bird flu published by the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH), [Avian Influenza, or "Bird Flu": What You Need to Know](#) [1]. The great uncertainty about bird flu is not whether the strain currently devastating bird flocks across Asia, Africa, and Europe will reach America -- it almost certainly will — but whether the current strain (H5N1) will mutate into a form easily passed between humans.

Right now, bird flu passes easily between birds but only on very rare occasions (173 known cases around the world as of late February 2006, with 93 deaths) from birds to humans. The humans who have succumbed lived in close proximity to infected birds. If several mutations occur in the virus -- unlikely but certainly not impossible -- it might begin to leap more easily from person to person, radically increasing the number of deaths, cautions the ACSH report.

The 1918 flu pandemic, which killed millions of people, likely began as a bird flu. That is one reason why ACSH notes the importance of taking precautions against a recurrence of such a tragedy. [Avian Influenza, or "Bird Flu": What You Need to Know](#) [1] details the steps currently being taken, including tracking of the disease's spread through bird populations, research on new antiviral drugs, funding of new technology that could accelerate vaccine production in the event of a pandemic, and the stockpiling of the antiviral drugs Tamiflu and Relenza (pro's and con's of which are discussed in the report, which also details how these drugs work).

“You see headlines about the spread of 'deadly' bird flu, but it's important to remember the difference between devastating birds and devastating human populations,” says one of the report's editors, ACSH Medical and Executive Director Dr. Gilbert Ross. “We want people to understand the difference between taking measures now to limit the very real spread in birds and the more research-oriented steps being taken in case the virus changes to move easily between humans — research that has little to do with some of the distracting things touted as solutions out there, like vitamin supplements or surgical masks.”

“While our best hope is that the feared mutations to H5N1 simply never occur, it is wise to be prepared for the small but real possibility, given what history teaches us about the potential

magnitude of such a pandemic,” says ACSH president Dr. Elizabeth Whelan. “At ACSH, we strongly and frequently advise against wasting resources on minimal or purely speculative threats, but this is one case where the consequences might be devastating enough to make a heavy investment now reasonable.”

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