



## HEALTH OFFICIALS PREPARE FOR BIRD FLU PANDEMIC

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*The threat of a deadly bird flu is the latest health scare to spur emergency planning in the United States and around the world.*

The top U.S. health official, Michael Leavitt, is traveling to Southeast Asia, where the avian or bird flu has spread through poultry and killed 60 people since 2003.

Leavitt said the risk of a flu pandemic – a flu outbreak that impacts many people around the world – is high.

“The likelihood of another [pandemic] is very high, some say even certain,” Leavitt said in Thailand, where he is meeting with health officials about prevention efforts.

President Bush has called for international plan to help the world prevent a pandemic.

“We're in communications with the world. I'm not predicting an outbreak. I'm just suggesting to you that we better be thinking about it, and we are,” the president said.

### **What is avian flu?**

Avian or bird flu is an infection caused by an influenza virus that occurs naturally in wild birds. Often referred to as the H5N1 virus, bird flu is spread easily among birds and can sicken and kill domesticated birds such as chickens, ducks and turkeys.

The virus does not usually infect humans but some humans have become infected after coming into contact with sick birds or contaminated surfaces.

Very few people have contracted the virus from a person, in what is called human-to-human contact. But scientists fear that because humans rarely get infected they also lack immune protection from the virus.

If the virus mutates or changes, as viruses often do, and becomes easily spread from person to person, experts worry that millions around the world could be infected.

The last flu pandemic, which started in Hong Kong in 1968, killed almost 1 million people. Between 20 million and 40 million people worldwide died as a result of the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918. Researchers recently discovered that the 1918 flu virus originated in birds.

## **Prevention efforts**

To prevent the wide-spread infection of millions, health officials are working to increase flu monitoring that will determine if people are getting the virus and to create flu vaccine stockpiles that can be used to contain infection.

“If you can get there fast enough and apply good public health techniques of isolating and quarantining and medicating and vaccinating the people in that area, you can ... squelch it or you can delay it,” Leavitt told the Associated Press.

Currently, one vaccine shows promise in fighting the virus, but making enough of it could take months because each virus is different.

“When and if a flu pandemic virus emerges, we will need to make vaccine to that virus so it's really not possible to stock pile a vaccine in large quantities in advance,” Dr. Julie Gerberding, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told the NewsHour.

If the vaccine is not ready, antiviral drugs like Tamiflu and Relenza, which do not cure influenza, could help reduce the number of infections and deaths.

## **Critics**

But some critics of international efforts say not enough money is being allocated to contain the virus in birds.

Farmers in poor countries like Vietnam and Indonesia are reluctant to kill birds exposed to the virus because they lose money needed to feed their own families. This could increase the chances of the virus spreading.

In the United States, some lawmakers point to the slow government response to Hurricane Katrina as evidence that local officials are not prepared for large-scale emergencies.

## **If avian flu spreads to the United States**

If containment and prevention fail and avian flu spreads to the United States, the Bush administration is looking into plans that could close schools, restrict travel and even use military troops to enforce a mass quarantine.

“If we had an outbreak somewhere in the United States, do we not then quarantine that part of the country? And who best to be able to effect a quarantine? One option is the use of a military that's able to plan and move. So that's why I put it on the table. I think it's an important debate for Congress to have,” President Bush said.

On an individual level, health officials say it's always a good idea for people to practice normal methods to avoid the spread of germs, such as regular hand-washing and keeping a distance from people who are coughing or have runny noses.

*--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

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