

CHICKEN ABOUT EATING POULTRY?

Properly cooking and handling your food is the answer.



With all the talk of avian flu, are you afraid to eat chicken?

Thinking of passing up omelettes or scrambled eggs because they might make you sick? The U.S. Department of Agriculture says you can put those worries aside: As long as poultry and eggs are properly handled and cooked, they're still safe to eat. We just need to take a common-sense approach to preparing food.

While the deadly type of avian flu that is a potential threat to humans has never been detected in U.S. poultry, properly cooking and handling your chicken, turkey or duck would kill the virus before it reaches your table, according to USDA.

The best way to be sure your food is safe is by using a meat thermometer to make sure your chicken is cooked all the way through.

The inside of your chicken should be at a temperature of at least 165 degrees throughout to kill foodborne germs that might be present, including salmonella, E. coli and influenza.

It's never a good idea to eat raw eggs, or food with raw egg ingredients such as cookie dough or cake batter (as tempting as it may be!). Play it safe by thoroughly cooking all dishes with raw eggs.

Here are some other helpful tips from USDA:

Wash your hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds (equal to singing the "Happy Birthday" song all the way through twice) before and after handling food.

Prevent the cross-contamination of foods by keeping raw meat, poultry, fish and their juices away from other items.

After cutting raw meats, wash your cutting board, knife and counter tops with hot, soapy water.

Sanitize cutting boards by using a solution of 1 teaspoon chlorine bleach in 1 quart of water.

For more tips, read the USDA's helpful brochure on avian flu or ask questions online via the USDA Web site. BON APPETIT!



THE FLU SHOT:

**The best thing
you can do
to head off the flu.**

The annual flu season begins in October and can continue until May.

Every year, between 5 percent and 20 percent of the U.S. population gets the flu. That means at least 15 million Americans (and as many as 60 million) get sick from the flu every year, with more than 200,000 hospitalizations and 36,000 deaths annually.

So, what can you do to protect yourself and your family from seasonal flu? Get a flu shot. October and November are the best months to get vaccinated, but the flu is still circulating in January and February, and sometimes even as late as May. The seasonal flu shot won't protect you from H5N1, the type of avian influenza that has killed birds and people in countries such as Indonesia and Thailand, but it can protect you from regular flu.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that certain people, including very young children, the elderly and people living with illnesses that affect the immune system get vaccinated against the flu. For a complete list of those who are most at risk, visit www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/keyfacts.htm.

Sometimes people are afraid to get a flu shot because of fears that it will make them sick, but the seasonal flu shot contains dead influenza virus, which experts call "inactive virus." You can't get sick from it because the virus is no longer alive. This vaccine, given with a needle, is approved for people older than 6 months of age. If you are allergic to eggs, contact your health care provider, as the flu vaccine will have to be administered differently, if at all.

Beyond the shot, there is a newer flu vaccine introduced recently that is given via a nasal spray. It is only recommended for healthy people between 5 and 49 years of age who are not pregnant, since it contains live (but weakened) flu virus. The spray is a great alternative to needles, especially for healthy, school-aged children.

**Whichever type you choose, vaccination is
the best thing you can do to head off the flu.**



WHAT DOES H5N1 MEAN?

With the alphabet soup of acronyms that are being talked about in reference to the flu (H5N1, CDC, WHO) it can be hard to understand exactly what is going on.

One of the most important acronyms you may have heard is H5N1, which is the name of the bird flu strain that is causing so much concern around the world right now. H5N1 has already caused a flu pandemic in birds and infected about 230 people.

So why is it called H5N1? Every time a new flu virus is identified, it is named for two proteins, hemagglutinin and neuraminidase, that are on the surface of the virus. Hence the H and the N abbreviation.

The numbers that are included in the virus name signal a genetic change in the virus.

Some combinations of H and N cause serious illness and death, while others only cause mild symptoms. Flu viruses that begin with H5 or H7 are highly likely to make birds and people sick.

And as for those other acronyms you may hear? CDC stands for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which is the principal federal health agency that works to protect the health and safety of Americans. WHO is the World Health Organization, the health arm of the United Nations. Both organizations are serving as watch-dogs for pandemic flu and sharing information as the threat develops.



PANDEMIC FLU PREVENTION:

The best advice may be “rub-a-dub-dub.”



With all the talk of a flu pandemic, it is good to know that the simplest of acts can help keep you safe.

You don't need a prescription (or the dreaded referral note from your doctor). It is as easy for a 50-year-old to do as it is for a 10-year-old, and it is free. In fact, it can help fight more than just the flu.

Here is how you do it: Find a sink, pick up some soap, wash your hands. Seems too simple to be true? Turns out, Mom was right: Washing your hands is good for your health. Viruses can survive on your hands for hours and washing your hands regularly is a proven way to decrease your chances of getting sick.

You are probably thinking "Of course, I wash my hands!" Well, not to burst your (soapy) bubble, but many of us are guilty of skipping

out at the sink. According to a survey sponsored by the American Society for Microbiology, 91 percent of adults say they always wash their hands after using a public bathroom, but only 83 percent were observed doing so. Only 32 percent say they wash their hands after coughing or sneezing, which means it may be time to replace "Gesundheit" with "Wash your hands!"

To illustrate just how big a small thing like washing your hands can be, in 2005, health workers in Karachi, Pakistan, educated residents about washing their hands and gave out free soap. The results were impressive. Incidents of impetigo, a contagious skin infection, decreased by 34 percent, diarrhea by 53 percent and pneumonia by 50 percent.

Here are a few tips: use warm water, wash with soap for at least 20 seconds (sing the "Happy Birthday" song twice), and if possible use your towel to turn off the faucet. If you are not near soap and water, an alcohol-based gel will do.

And if not getting sick is not enough to make you wash your hands, just think how proud your Mom would be.





SO WHAT IS A FLU PANDEMIC, ANYWAY?

It is getting pretty confusing. We keep hearing about how a flu pandemic is likely. Then, the conversation turns to bird flu. So what is the difference between regular flu and avian flu, and why are people making a flu pandemic seem so scary?

An influenza pandemic occurs when a new type of flu virus that our bodies are not protected against spreads around the world, causing serious illness and possibly even death.

The flu shot that people are encouraged to get annually for seasonal flu will offer little or no protection against pandemic flu, as this is a different strain of virus.

Because our bodies have not come across the virus that causes a pandemic, people can easily catch it from one another. Anyone who gets the new virus can become much sicker than they would for seasonal flu.

So, what is the link to birds? The flu that is currently causing concern is a strain that occurs primarily in poultry. It's also sickened other animals, including cats that have eaten birds. More troubling, though, is that this new type of bird flu has sickened people who are in close contact with birds, such as those that work and live on farms.

Right now, people cannot easily catch this bird flu from another person. But that could change if the virus mutates—causing the next flu pandemic.

Although people are used to flu season occurring at a certain time of year, a flu pandemic can happen anytime.

Every year, more than 200,000 people in the United States are hospitalized because of seasonal flu, and 36,000 people die from it. A flu pandemic can be hundreds of times worse than that. Past flu pandemics have sent millions to the hospital and killed hundreds of thousands in this country. It is definitely something that everybody needs to get ready for. The first step though, is for everyone, including our friends, families, and our mothers, to learn more about pandemic flu.



QUARANTINE:

Scary scenario, or practical approach?



Think of the word quarantine. What comes to mind? Do scenes from the movie “Outbreak” flash by, with Dustin Hoffman and René Russo donning spacesuit-gear and the military forcibly keeping people in their communities?

Will that really happen when pandemic flu strikes? Not likely. In fact, public health officials have a more realistic plan in mind.

Let’s start with some definitions. “**Quarantine**” is when people who are not sick but have likely been exposed to a virus are separated from others. These people may be urged to not leave their homes or towns. A related term is “**isolation**.” That’s when a person who is already sick is separated from other people to reduce the chances that she or he will get others sick.

Health officials in Asia and Canada took precautions during the SARS outbreak a few years ago. But quarantine and isolation are likely to only play a small role in how communities respond to a flu pandemic. Why? Because pandemic flu spreads rapidly, and people can catch it from others who are sick but do not yet show any symptoms of being ill. (While common sense tells you to avoid the sneezing guy with the runny nose and blood-shot eyes, what about the woman who seems perfectly healthy?)

Rather than a situation like the one portrayed in an overblown Hollywood movie, scientists expect restrictive measures to be voluntary. People will be encouraged to stay home from work or school to limit interacting with others to reduce their chances of getting sick. Schools will be closed and community events cancelled. Sick people will be separated from those who are not—both in health facilities and at home.

What should you do to prepare for the possibility of staying home from work or school? We’ve developed materials that include items that you should stockpile to be ready for a flu pandemic or anything else that comes your way—blizzard, hurricane or another disaster. As far as seeing spacesuits in the near future, you’re more likely to see them on astronauts orbiting the planet than here on Earth.



'TIS THE SEASON:

Holiday Traveler's Advice for Preventing the Spread of Infectious Disease

Traveling home for the holidays?

If you aren't careful, you could end up bringing home an uninvited guest to meet the family: infectious disease.

In addition to monitoring the weather for possible delays, squeezing everyone's gifts into your suitcase and bagging your carry-on liquids for the plane trip, travelers should take a few extra steps to protect themselves from germs and viruses while traveling:

Get vaccinated. Immunization can drastically reduce your chances of contracting many infectious diseases. Before you travel, make sure you, your family members and loved ones have gotten their seasonal flu shot.

Keep hydrated. Drink lots of water before and during your flight.

Try to catch some sleep on the way.

Most of us get sick when we are stressed or tired. Catching some ZZZs on the plane, train or bus, might help you to stave off a little of that exhaustion.

Bring a scarf or a small blanket. Packing a small blanket, scarf or sweatshirt in your carry-on bag will allow you to bundle up when you get cold without using blankets that have been who knows where.

Keep your hands clean. You've heard it before and you'll hear it again: The best thing you can do to prevent the spread of germs and protect your health is to regularly wash your hands with warm water and soap.

If you are flying, turn up the air. While there has been speculation that the forced-air systems in planes spread germs, experts say the air vents above your seat on planes can help push away the germs that might float into your space.

Keep to your schedule. As best you can, try not to change your daily habits. Eat the same breakfast, work out the same amount and avoid over- or under-sleeping.

Watch for symptoms. After your return home, monitor your health. If you become ill with a fever, cough, sore throat, shortness in breath or any other of the regular symptoms of the flu, call your doctor.

