

Antivirals and Bird Flu

The type of influenza (flu) virus that is currently affecting wild and domestic birds in other parts of the world is called highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1. HPAI H5N1 (bird flu) has a high death rate in some birds. It is unusual because it has also affected some people, and over 50% of those known to be infected have died. Most of the infected people have become sick after close contact with infected birds without wearing a mask or using gloves. There is concern that this HPAI H5N1 virus could change and become easily transmitted from person to person, causing a global pandemic, or worldwide human illness. It is important to keep in mind that there is no human influenza pandemic in the world at this time.

- ❖ Antivirals are medications that treat illness caused by a virus.
- ❖ Studies done in laboratories suggest that antivirals approved to treat human flu viruses are also expected to work in treating avian flu infection in humans. However, flu viruses can change, and these medications might not always work. Additional studies are needed.
- ❖ Antivirals may lessen the severity of illness in people if they are given very early during illness.
- ❖ Antivirals given to people who are ill may help reduce the contagiousness of the illness, and therefore reduce the number of people who become ill.
- ❖ Research suggests that two antivirals, oseltamavir (Tamiflu®) and zanamavir (Relenza®), may be useful treatments for H5N1 avian influenza. Two other available antivirals, amantadine and rimantadine, do not appear to be effective in treating avian flu.
- ❖ The federal government is stockpiling Tamiflu® and Relenza®, and it is encouraging states to do the same. New Hampshire is investigating this option.
- ❖ The state and federal governments do not recommend that individuals try to keep a stockpile of antivirals at home. Antivirals do not last forever in storage and, as with other medications, should be taken under the supervision of a healthcare provider.
- ❖ Despite state and federal stockpiling, it is likely that there will not be enough antivirals available to treat everyone who becomes ill if there is a pandemic.

- ❖ Recommendations for which groups should receive antivirals, and at what stage during a pandemic, will be made based on available data and recommendations from both the NH Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

For specific concerns about bird flu, call the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Communicable Disease Control Section at 603-271-4496 or 800-852-3345 x4496. For further information, refer to the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services website at www.avianflu.nh.gov or the US Department of Health and Human Services website at www.pandemicflu.gov.