

Avian Flu and Pandemic Preparedness

Although it is unclear when the currently circulating H5N1 strain of avian influenza virus will arrive in Maine and it is unknown whether it will cause a human pandemic, one thing is clear: we need to be prepared for both. As we watch Europe struggle with avian flu's spread and resulting fears about birds and eating poultry, we have some idea about the challenges ahead for us. And, even if this current strain does not explode into a pandemic, we know from human history that at some point in time a microbe will challenge us with a pandemic. Therefore, we all need to do our part to prepare.

For Maine physicians, there are several resources and opportunities for avian flu and pandemic preparedness.

1. There is a new website unveiled on May 9th by state officials and private sector partner organizations, including the Maine Medical Association. www.maine flu.gov provides information on avian or bird flu, pandemic influenza, and seasonal flu for Mainers, including specific information for physicians.
2. Physicians are encouraged to review and use the preparedness checklists for health care settings. The checklist for medical offices, for instance, provides a framework for physicians and their staff to review their practices' preparedness. Other checklists exist for home health care services, emergency medical services, and hospitals. They can be found at www.maine flu.gov or www.pandemic flu.gov.
3. The Maine CDC, with help from some federal funds, is asking each county and hospital to develop pandemic influenza preparedness plans this spring and summer. Starting this fall, these plans are expected to be exercised and drilled. Physicians are welcome and encouraged to become involved with this planning process. Contact information for county and hospital efforts is available on the www.maine flu.gov website.
4. This spring, the Maine CDC started a Flu email newsletter every Friday on timely local, state, national, and global issues related to pandemic preparedness, avian flu, and seasonal flu for interested Mainers. You are welcome to sign up for this newsletter by either emailing Janet Austin at janet.austin@maine.gov or looking under the "Contact" tab on the www.maine flu.gov homepage.
5. The Maine CDC will be soon hosting a Maine pandemic, avian, and seasonal flu list serve. Sign ups will be available through the email newsletter as well as the "Contact" tab on the www.maine flu.gov homepage.
6. Physicians can encourage their patients to take steps to be prepared, such as having a home emergency kit with at least three days' of food and supplies. Patient information can be found at www.maine flu.gov website.

Hopefully the current H5N1 strain of avian flu will not explode into a pandemic, but all of us need to do our part to prepare. Physicians are a critical component to this preparedness as well as any potential response.