

PRESS INFORMATION



Revised ECDC risk assessment highlight need to accelerate pandemic preparedness

Stockholm – 1 June 2006

A revised risk assessment published today by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) highlights the need for governments to intensify preparations against a possible influenza pandemic. While the assessment concludes that “bird flu”, in its present form, presents only a low risk to humans, it expresses concern about the spread of H5N1 among birds in Asia and Africa. Developments in recent months mean that more humans than ever are being exposed to the virus, increasing the possibilities for the virus to adapt or mutate into a human pandemic virus.

Zsuzsanna Jakab, Director of ECDC said:

“The spread of H5N1 across Africa and Asia means more people than ever are now being exposed to it. We do not know for sure whether “bird flu” is going to mutate into a human pandemic virus. However, we are getting nearer to finding out. This underlines the need for Europe to move ahead with its preparedness against a pandemic.”

In May ECDC, the European Commission and WHO Europe held a meeting with senior public health officials from across Europe to discuss preparedness against a possible influenza pandemic (see ECDC press release of 17 May 2006). Today's risk assessment from ECDC underlines the importance of reinforcing and accelerating Europe's preparedness drive.

Details of risk assessment

ECDC's new risk assessment points out that, because of its occasional presence in wild birds, Europeans may have to adapt to the fact that H5N1 is one of the zoonoses (animal diseases capable of passing to humans) present on our continent. It finds no evidence that H5N1 has, as yet, become any better adapted to humans than it was in 1997 when the virus first emerged. The few humans who become infected do so only when exposed to high doses of the virus.

People who keep poultry near where they live need to be aware of the risk from H5N1 and how to protect themselves. In addition some precautions need to be taken to

PRESS INFORMATION



protect people such as vets and poultry farm workers. However, the overall level of risk to the public in Europe from “bird flu” in its current form is lower than for many other infections that can pass from animals to humans – for example, e-coli, salmonella and campylobacter. As of yet, there have been no human cases of H5N1 in the European Union, compared with thousands of infections each year from other zoonoses.

The major cause for concern about H5N1 “bird flu” is its potential to mutate or adapt into a human pandemic virus. There is no way of knowing whether or when this might happen. However, the increased exposure of humans to H5N1 resulting from its spread across Africa and Asia multiplies the opportunities for it to adapt or mutate, if it has that capability.

This increased exposure raises the importance of preparing for a pandemic. Even if a pandemic caused by “bird flu” never occurs, the same preparations will protect against other pandemics based on other viruses. Three influenza pandemics occurred in the 20th century – in 1918-1920, in 1957 and 1968. It is inevitable that another pandemic will occur at some point in the coming years.

Further information

www.ecdc.eu.int

Ben Duncan, ECDC Spokesman, +46 (0)708 597833