

# BIRD FLU

*Potential outbreak motivates BCTC to form response committee, promote student awareness*

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With a string of fatal outbreaks in Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa, Bluegrass Community and Technical College is making a concerted effort to better prepare its students in the event of unexpected outbreak of the lethal avian flu virus.

The hazardous virus, appropriately nicknamed the "bird flu," has recently seen an increase in the number cases involving humans—rising from 95 global cases in 2005, to approximately 258 cases as of November 13, 2006. Of the 258 reported cases, 153 resulted in death—according to the World Health Organization.

In response to this concern, BCTC has established the Pandemic Response Planning Committee—a coalition of well-informed BCTC staff members who are tasked with the responsibility of educating students and faculty about viruses, diseases and illnesses that could have potentially pandemic effects.

"A number of students are a bit uneducated about the avian flu," said Marilyn Childre, assistant to the president/special projects and lead coordinator of the Pandemic Response Planning Committee for BCTC. "Education on prevention methods and how to care for yourself and family members are key, should an outbreak occur."

To increase awareness about the avian flu, The Pandemic Response Committee has written an online handbook, called the "Avian Flu Prevention Handbook" which can be accessed online from the BCTC home page under "pandemic response plan". The committee is also providing other items such as bulletin board posters, bookmarkers and links to various websites to help assist BCTC students in the education process.

However, with outbreaks yet to occur in United States, the sudden precautionary measures BCTC has taken may come as a surprise to some. But according to Childre and the BCTC Pandemic Response Committee, the safety measures being taken are more than justified.

"According to the U.S. Office of Health and Human Services, scientists

are predicting that the world is due for an influenza pandemic. The 'at risk' age group is the 20-to 30-year-olds because they tend to socialize in group gatherings." Said Childre.

Consequently, if an outbreak of the bird flu were to strike locally, BCTC students are likely to be greatly affected by the virus.

## CONCERNS/ DEVELOPMENTS

The avian flu, like most viruses, is constantly evolving, adapting to become more resistant to modern vaccines and mutating to become more efficient at infecting its hosts. This remarkable adaptability is the main reason health experts are going to such extreme measures to ensure the spread of this disease is minimized according to Sandra Mullins and the pandemic response team.

"Avian flu viruses are important to watch and understand because other influenza viruses have the potential to change and gain the ability to spread easily between people," stated Sandra Mullins, associate dean of academic affairs and member of the Pandemic Response Planning Committee, "thus monitoring for human infection and person-to-person transmission is important."

Although it affects mainly birds, recent subtypes of the virus, most notably, the infamous H5N1 strain has been documented as having lethal affects on humans.

Although the virus is currently believed to be incapable of transferring directly from human to human, if it were to gain that ability, according to the response team, the outcome could be devastating.

Containing the virus has also been a matter of difficulty, as many of the infected birds are migratory animals, often traveling to various countries uninhibited.

## INFECTION

Humans contract H5N1 and other types of avian influenza through pro-

longed exposure to infected birds. The birds pass the virus through excretions in their feces, which subsequently are inhaled by unsuspecting people.

## SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of the bird flu are similar to other types of influenza and include fever, cough, muscle aches, sore throat, eye infections, pneumonia and acute respiratory distress. However, the bird flu does differ from the common seasonal flu in that the symptoms tend to occur at an unusually swift rate—often resulting in rapid health deterioration within one to three days.

"Sometimes conjunctivitis is the only indication of the disease," said Childre, noting that conjunctivitis from an eye infection is one of the few signs of having the avian flu.

## PREVENTION

Preventing the spread of germs by using basic sanitation methods is, at the moment, the best preventative measure students can take. Thoroughly washing your hands and covering your mouth when sneezing or coughing can greatly reduce the likelihood of catching the avian flu—as well as other illnesses.

"The over-the-counter bottled hand sanitizer is also effective because of the high alcohol content, which kills viruses and germs," said Childre, "If you are ill and have a fever and achy joints, stay at home. You are contagious, and can pass on your virus to fellow students or co-workers."

Traveling to areas where the bird flu has been detected is something the committee also advises against. Places such as China, Indonesia and Thailand have recently seen an influx in avian flu cases.

The Pandemic Response Committee also assures students that eating properly prepared poultry, including chicken, roast duck and turkey will not increase your chances of contracting the avian flu.

## PANDEMIC WITH A HISTORY

- The avian flu was first recorded in Italy more than 100 years ago, in 1878. At the time the virus was known simply as the "fowl plague."

- In 1918, a severe form of influenza dubbed "The Spanish Flu" by Allied forces in World War I, swept through parts of Africa, Asia, North America, and Australia. The Pandemic virus is thought to have killed around 20 to 100 million people worldwide.

- The avian flu, made brief appearances in the United States during 1924-1925, and then again in 1929, but was quickly eradicated.

- The "Asian flu" pandemic began in 1957, spreading from China to various other countries including the United States. According to [www.foxnews.com](http://www.foxnews.com), the virus killed approximately one million people worldwide, including 70,000 Americans.

- The last influenza pandemic occurred in 1968. Dubbed the "Hong Kong" flu, the virus lasted through 1969 and killed an estimated 34,000 Americans.

- After a long period of dormancy, concerns over the virus were quickly renewed after a brief reappearance in Hong Kong in 1997. A man contracted the first reported case of H5N1, with many scientists foreshadowing another global pandemic.

- In 2003, five years after the H5N1 virus initially showed up, the virus surfaced once again in the Netherlands and parts of Asia, this time however the outbreak was not isolated and the H5N1 virus began to emerge in numerous places throughout the year.

- 2003-Present has seen numerous outbreaks of the avian flu virus among many countries.

source: [www.foxnews.com](http://www.foxnews.com)