

Human infection with avian influenza A(H7N9) virus

The weekly numbers of new cases of human infection with avian influenza A(H7N9) virus has started to decrease, with only two laboratory-confirmed cases reported since the start of May 2013. As of 16 May 2013, China has reported a total of 131 laboratory-confirmed cases, including 32 deaths. For the latest update on cases, see the following WHO link: http://www.who.int/csr/don/2013_05_08/en/index.html.

Although it is too soon to speculate, the World Health Organization reports suggest that the decrease may have resulted from control measures that were put in place, including the closing of live-bird markets. Another possible explanation is seasonal changes, as past avian influenza virus outbreaks have often tended to show seasonal patterns of occurrence, with most outbreaks occurring during the colder months of the years and fewer in the warmer months.

Much remains unknown about this virus, including the animal reservoir/s in which it is circulating, the main exposures, and routes of transmission. Human infection appears to be related to live poultry or contaminated environment exposure. There is no evidence of sustained human-to-human transmission.

Healthcare workers should consider the possibility of infection with avian influenza A (H7N9) virus in persons hospitalised with severe respiratory illness and an appropriate travel or exposure history. Guidance on case definitions and testing for avian influenza A(H7N9) virus can be accessed at the NICD website: <http://www.nicd.ac.za/>.

Source: Centre for Respiratory Diseases and Meningitis, NICD-NHLS