

Definitive testing for influenza virus infection, including avian influenza (H5N1), now available from the Florida public health laboratory

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Essential elements of any control strategy for an influenza pandemic include:

- identification of early cases due to the new strain of influenza virus, and
- virologic surveillance to identify which strains of influenza are circulating.

The Florida Department of Health is pleased to be able to continue offering laboratory testing for infection with influenza viruses. This testing now also includes, upon request and approval by the Bureau of Epidemiology, identification of infection with the H5N1 avian strain currently causing disease in birds in large portions of Asia and Europe and causing human spill-over disease in Southeast Asia.

Currently, we are particularly interested in receiving specimens for routine influenza testing from persons who are part of early-season, late-season, or clinically unusual clusters of influenza-like illness. We are interested in receiving specimens specifically for H5N1 testing from persons with influenza-like illness who have recently returned from countries where there is widespread H5N1 disease in birds, or in people, or who have extensive wild bird contact in the US. For more detail see the resources below.

Five resources have been posted on the Florida Department of Health's website at http://www.doh.state.fl.us/disease_ctrl/epi/htopics/birdflu.htm. These include:

1. A description of the public health laboratories' algorithm for testing specimens submitted for influenza testing under various scenarios;
2. Guidance for physicians and public health agencies on who should be tested for avian influenza;
3. DOH guidance on how to get approval for avian influenza testing through the state public health laboratories (pre-approval needed for avian influenza testing, but not for routine influenza testing);
4. A form for county health department and clinician use in collecting exposure and clinical information about people with suspected avian influenza infection;
5. Frequently Asked Questions about Avian influenza.

As the situation with H5N1 influenza in birds and humans changes, elsewhere in the world and in the United States, our recommendations as to who should be tested, and our laboratory procedures, are likely to change. We will keep you informed as the situation evolves.