

Beat: Health

3rd person dies of new bird flu virus in eastern China

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USPA News - A third person in eastern China has died of a new strain of avian influenza that had never before been transmitted to humans, health authorities said on Wednesday, as the number of confirmed cases reached nine despite there being no evidence of human-to-human transmission. The Zhejiang Provincial Health Department said laboratory tests have confirmed that a 38-year-old cook who died last month was suffering from avian influenza, which is better known as bird flu.

The tests showed he had contracted H7N9, which is a relatively new strain that was only known to infect birds. Authorities said the man, who worked in neighboring Jiangsu Province, became ill on March 7, was hospitalized on March 18, and died on March 27. A second person, a 67-year-old retired man from Zhejiang province, has also tested positive for H7N9 after becoming ill on March 25 with fever, cough and other symptoms. He was later hospitalized but his condition was not immediately known. Health authorities have so far been in touch with 183 close contacts of the two patients, but none of them have reported having a fever or respiratory symptoms. It is unclear how either was infected as they did not know each other, although it was not immediately clear whether the men had been in direct contact with poultry or wild birds. The two H7N9 cases come just three days after China's National Health and Family Planning Commission said that two men from Shanghai and a woman from Anhui province were also diagnosed with the virus. The two men eventually died but the woman remains in a critical condition after being hospitalized in neighboring Jiangsu province. Four more cases were reported on Tuesday by the Jiangsu Provincial Health Department, which said one man and three women had tested positive for H7N9 avian influenza. The four patients remained in critical conditions on Wednesday at various hospitals in China's eastern region. It remains unclear how the nine patients became infected with the new virus, but Chinese and international health authorities have stressed they have seen no evidence of human-to-human transmission. Some experts have suggested that the virus may have mutated, allowing it to infect poultry without generating symptoms while sickening humans. However, the World Health Organization (WHO) said experts are investigating two people who became ill after being in contact with one of the reported cases in Shanghai. "Both of these contacts developed symptoms of illness; one died and the other recovered," a spokesperson said. "No laboratory confirmation is available for these two contacts." Also on Wednesday, China's Ministry of Agriculture said it has found no signs of H7N9 bird flu infections in poultry or other animals. The ministry explained further investigation is necessary to determine how the virus is infecting humans, and it said the strain had previously only been found in wild birds. There have been no known cases of poultry being infected with the virus. The Chinese government has said it is closely monitoring the situation and cities in eastern provinces have stepped up public health measures for early detection, diagnosis and treatment. Communication efforts between human and animal health and industry sectors have also been increased, while citizens have been urged to maintain good personal hygiene and avoid direct contact with sick or dead animals. "WHO is in contact with national authorities and is following the event closely," a WHO spokesperson said on Wednesday. The spokesperson said no vaccine is currently available for this sub-type of avian influenza, but said preliminary test results provided by the WHO Collaborating Center in China suggest that the virus is susceptible to the neuraminidase inhibitors (oseltamivir and zanamivir). In Hong Kong, a spokesman for the Center for Health Protection (CHP) said it would closely monitor the situation and urged members of the public to remain vigilant for possible cases of bird flu. "We will heighten our vigilance and continue to maintain stringent port health measures in connection with this development," he said on Sunday. Following the new cases this week, the CHP spokesman advised travelers from Shanghai, Anhui, Zhejiang and Jiangsu with respiratory symptoms to wear facial masks, seek medical attention and reveal their travel histories to doctors. He also said healthcare professionals should pay special attention to those travelers who may have been in contact with birds or poultry in eastern China. While there is no known vaccine for H7N9, the strain is different from the well-known H5N1 variant. Since 2003, the H5N1 bird flu virus has killed or forced the culling of more than 400 million domestic poultry worldwide and caused an estimated \$20 billion in economic damage before it was eliminated from most of the 63 infected countries. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the bird flu virus has infected at least 605 people since it first appeared, killing 357 of them. Most cases and deaths were recorded in Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt and China. Vietnam, Indonesia, China and Cambodia all reported bird flu deaths last year.

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