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Romanian vets bag a dead goose, possibly killed by avian flu, in order to incinerate it east of Bucharest yesterday. Picture: AFP/Getty Images

Deadly flu virus has already reached gateway to Europe

SHAN ROSS

Key points

- Health officials confirm that H5N1 flu has been identified in birds in Turkey
- Results from dead birds in Romania expected shortly
- Only if virus transmits between humans will it become dangerous

Key quote

"We have to prepare for the fact that bird flu will arrive in Britain - and within weeks. But the key is that, as yet, it hasn't been transmitted between humans. That is when we need to panic." - *PROF PETER OPENSHAW*

Story in full THE deadly bird flu virus will arrive in Britain within weeks, experts warned last night as the EU urged member states to stock up on anti-viral drugs.

Health officials confirmed that the H5N1 strain of flu, which has devastated bird flocks in South-east Asia and which could one day mutate and kill millions of people, had been identified in birds in Turkey.

EU experts are still awaiting results of tests on dead birds in Romania to see if they, too, were infected with the same virulent strain.

Yesterday's confirmation that bird flu had arrived caused a flurry of activity across Europe.



In Romania and Turkey thousands of birds were slaughtered while in Serbia, people snapped up face masks and hunters were told to leave wild birds alone.

The EU moved quickly to ban poultry imports from the affected region.

Today, EU veterinary experts will meet to discuss measures to try to prevent the spread of the disease to the 25-nation bloc. But some experts now consider it inevitable that bird flu will spread to Britain through movements of wild bird populations.

Professor Peter Openshaw, of Imperial College, London, said: "We have to prepare for the fact that bird flu will arrive in Britain - and within weeks. But the key is that, as yet, it hasn't been transmitted between humans. That is when we need to panic."

Dr Debby Reynolds, Britain's chief veterinary officer, said the government was carrying out a "rapid risk assessment" of the situation. She also warned the public to report any suspicions of the disease immediately.

"Confirmation that a highly pathogenic avian influenza has been found in Turkey and that avian influenza is now also in Romania is of concern," Dr Reynolds said.

"It shows that there is a risk to the UK and this is a developing situation which we are monitoring closely.

"The last time the UK had an outbreak of avian flu was in 1992 when it was brought under control and eradicated. The key to tackling the disease is to detect it early and stop it spreading. Any suspicion of disease should be reported immediately and all poultry keepers must strengthen their biosecurity and protect the health of their birds," she added.

Scientists fear that the H5N1 bird flu virus could mutate into a human pandemic strain if people suffering normal human flu are infected. Standard flu vaccines, normally given to young children, the elderly and sick, are unlikely to protect against bird flu. Those who have been in the presence of dead or dying birds are most likely to become infected, and the chances of human-to-human transmission are still seen as very slim.

Yesterday Markos Kyprianou, the EU health commissioner, said attempting to protect the EU population was essential to prevent the spread of the virus which has killed more than 60 people in Asia since 2003.

Speaking at a news conference, Mr Kyprianou advised seasonal flu vaccination for populations considered to be at risk and said governments should focus on stockpiling anti-viral drugs.

"What is important is that it does become a priority for all member states and that they make an investment for preparing for this event," he said.

Mr Kyprianou said an emergency meeting was being held to discuss what measures to take.

The commissioner confirmed the virus found in Turkey was the deadly strain, adding:

"It is a highly pathogenic and aggressive virus and we in the European Union have to deal with that."

Last night, Professor Hugh Pennington, president of the Society for General Microbiology, said the bird flu virus could mutate at any time, "today, tomorrow, next week" in the UK.

Prof Pennington also said there were not enough anti-viral drugs to give to the general population and that a vaccine to treat the disease, which was still an unknown quantity, was about 12 months away.

He said that while at the moment the only danger was to birds, the bird flu virus could mutate and kill more people than any epidemic seen in the UK.

"It is an entirely random process which could take place today, tomorrow or next week - or not for another decade. None of us have ever met this virus before, so as far as our immune systems are concerned, it is a brand new virus to which we are all susceptible.

"If this virus transmits between humans - which it hasn't yet done - it will go through the population like a dose of salts and kill millions, especially the young, the old and pregnant women.

"This is a theoretical possibility, but a very real possibility nevertheless. There is as yet no protection against it and a vaccine against it just does not exist at present."

Sainsbury's, Britain's third biggest supermarket chain, said it had contingency plans in place to safeguard turkey stocks for Christmas.

"We have been putting business contingency plans in place for a while in case of an outbreak of bird flu," a spokesman said.

A Department of Health spokeswoman said: "The European Commissioner has raised an important point - that people at risk of seasonal flu should make sure that they get their routine vaccination as they do every year."

There is no vaccine against bird flu but EU experts hope that by vaccinating people against other strains of flu, their resistance can be built up.

However, last night a Downing Street spokesman admitted it would take four to six months after the first person was infected to develop a vaccine which may have the capability of defeating the virus.

"You cannot analyse the precise strain and therefore design a drug to counter that strain," he said.

Web links

- [Dept of Health - pandemic flu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en)
<http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en>
- [WHO - Bird Flu fact sheet](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/)
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Related topic

- [Bird flu](http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=161)

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