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Romanian police are on mission to destroy birds.  
Picture: Frederick Florin/AFP/Getty Images

## Fears of drug resistance in human form of bird flu

SHAN ROSS

DOUBTS about the efficacy of the main drug being stockpiled in Britain to combat a possible outbreak of deadly bird flu have emerged after a strain of the virus resistant to the treatment was found in a Vietnamese girl.

The British government has purchased 14.6 million courses of Tamiflu as part of its contingency plans to deal with bird flu. But Japanese scientists have found a strain of the H5N1 virus resistant to Tamiflu in a girl in Vietnam who had been put on a course of preventive treatment with the drug for four days in February.

Viruses and bacteria can become resistant if the treatment used against them is too weak.

Last night, a Department of Health spokeswoman said there were no current plans to administer the drug in the same way as a preventive measure to either healthy members of the public or health workers.

She said the government had followed World Health Organisation recommendations to opt for Tamiflu rather than its alternative, Relenza.

Experts said it was too early to comment on the findings of the Japanese research team, due to be published in the journal Nature next week. Researchers, who stressed that they have only one case of the resistant strain, concluded that other drugs would need to be stockpiled as a precaution.

Question marks over Tamiflu emerged as Europe's top veterinary officers met in Brussels to discuss how to stop the avian flu spreading west. A statement released by the EU said the



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measures, hammered out after two days of emergency talks by veterinary experts, focused on "strengthening biosecurity measures on farms" and "introducing early detection systems in high-risk areas" such as wetlands frequented by wild birds.

Meanwhile, in Turkey officials confirmed that they had tested nine people for bird flu, one day after EU health officials confirmed the virus found on a Turkish farm was the killer strain.

The nine from two families in the western town of Turgutlu, near Kiziksa - where the infected birds appeared - were kept under observation and underwent tests after the death of 40 of their pigeons within two weeks.

Samples of Romanian bird flu being sent to the Veterinary Laboratories Agency in Weybridge, Surrey, were delayed yesterday at customs in Bucharest. Test results - now due this weekend or Monday - are expected to confirm that the virus found in Turkey has spread to Romania.

The Japanese scientists believe the Vietnamese girl may be one of the first H5N1 victims to acquire the virus through person-to-person transmission.

The virus has so far been known to pass only from birds to humans. At least one other case of transmission between humans has been suspected, but not confirmed.

Health officials fear that the H5N1 strain of flu, which has devastated bird flocks in south-east Asia, could mutate, resulting in the death of millions of people.

More than 60 humans have died from the virus in the region since the disease began ravaging poultry stocks two years ago. So far, most cases have been linked to contact with birds.

As human concerns were raised over bird flu, the National Farmers' Union yesterday warned that sales of poultry and chickens could be affected.

Its president, Tim Bennett, said the public was not properly informed about bird flu and was receiving confused messages.

"This is a disease that is in eastern Europe and not even in this country," he said. "Of course we do not take the threat of avian influenza in any way lightly; we have contingency plans in place. But let's get some perspective - we are talking about a pandemic when there is not even a mutation of the virus."

Dr Harry Burns, Scotland's chief medical officer, said: "The public should be reassured that, despite the recent discovery of avian flu in Turkey, the risk of a possible flu pandemic is no higher now than it was earlier this year.

"The risk of avian flu in the UK remains low. There is no imminent threat to humans from avian flu as it is not easily transmitted to humans."

## 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/](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/)

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