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An Italian supermarket worker holds up a box of eggs. The Italian Health Ministry has said that eggs are safe to eat, downplaying remarks made by the European Food Safety Authority.

Picture: Filippo Monteforte/ AFP/ Getty Images

## Food expert attacks EU bird flu advice

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### Key points

- British expert says EU agency advice confuses bird flu with salmonella
- Professor Pennington says no chance of catching disease from food
- Concerns as three French tourists reported to have bird flu after holiday trip

### Key quote

"The advice not to eat under-cooked chickens and not to eat raw eggs is sound advice ... [but] this is long-standing advice which hasn't changed for 15 years. They have reiterated it again, but in the context of bird flu, which is quite inappropriate" - *Professor Hugh Pennington*

**Story in full** ONE of Britain's leading microbiologists last night clashed with European health experts over their warning to consumers to avoid uncooked eggs and poultry amid the bird flu alert.

Professor Hugh Pennington said the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) had reiterated long-standing advice related to salmonella in a "quite inappropriate" way.

He said the chance of a human catching the virus from eating an egg was "for all practical purposes, zero". That was down to several reasons, he said, including the fact that birds suffering from lethal diseases do not lay eggs.

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The EFSA, which was deluged by calls "from all Europe" yesterday, attempted to play down its explosive remarks but then added to the confusion by issuing a statement containing the same comments in a slightly different form.

The row - with strong echoes of the salmonella-in-eggs scare that ended the former Tory minister Edwina Currie's political career and saw egg sales plummet - broke out as the government announced new measures to guard against bird flu spreading to British poultry.

There was heightened concern about the human form of the disease with the news that three tourists returning to the French Reunion Islands in the Indian Ocean from a week-long holiday in Thailand were feared to have caught it. They visited a bird park and may have been exposed to the disease there.

The British government, among others, moved to play down the idea that there was any real risk of catching bird flu from food, and Prof Pennington, of Aberdeen University, said the EFSA should have been more careful in issuing advice on chicken and eggs.

"I don't know why EFSA has played it this way," he said. "The advice not to eat under-cooked chickens and not to eat raw eggs is sound advice ... [but] this is long-standing advice which hasn't changed for 15 years. They have reiterated it again, but in the context of bird flu, which is quite inappropriate."

Prof Pennington said it was "quite wrong" to link eating chickens or eggs with a risk of catching bird flu.

"I think the chances of anybody catching bird flu from eggs is, for all practical purposes, zero. The sick birds with pathogenic bird flu do not lay eggs for a start - they are at death's door," he said.

"Bird flu is not having an effect on European [Union] poultry. It might in the future, but with the current awareness of bird flu, one dead bird and the guy running the henhouse will be jumping up and down wanting to know what it is.

"Even if people ate a dead bird, the virus is in the lungs and the guts, which are not consumed, and the virus is killed when it's cooked. Humans don't contract flu through food. There are several reasons piling on top of each other to say this is not a food-transmitted disease."

The 119 confirmed human cases worldwide had been mostly among "people who had close contact with live, sick birds, who are excreting large amounts of virus, not people sitting in restaurants", he said. The suspected cases of bird flu in La Reunion had still to be confirmed, he said, and the source of the infection would then have to be identified.

"It's early days yet to say this is the start of the pandemic, but we have to wait and see."

A spokeswoman for the French health ministry said the three people from the Reunion Islands had visited a bird park in Thailand and come into close contact with birds there. But there were reports in France that the tourists themselves claimed they had stayed in an air-conditioned bus.

They were said to be "doing well", possibly a sign that the positive test for bird flu had been a

false alarm.

Meanwhile, the EFSA issued a statement which it summarised as saying "there is no evidence to suggest to date that avian influenza can be transmitted to humans through consumption of food, notably poultry and eggs".

However, the actual statement said the "possibility cannot however be excluded" and stated that this was being kept under review.

British consumers seem to be buying roughly the same amount of eggs and chicken as previously, but bird flu has been blamed for considerable drops in sales in mainland Europe.

When asked about the EFSA's comments on the theoretical risk from eating poultry, Dr Judith Hilton, the head of microbiological safety at the Food Standards Agency, echoed Prof Pennington's comments. She said : "It is something that, on scientific grounds, you can never entirely rule out. But, in practice, looking at the cases that are occurring in the Far East, they are people who are getting flu in the way that we normally get flu, through what we breathe."

In the House of Commons yesterday, the Environment Secretary, Margaret Beckett, announced that the government was planning to bring forward new regulations to combat the threat of a flu pandemic. Bird fairs, markets and shows will be banned, except where a risk assessment has shown that they can go ahead safely.

The regulations will also give legal effect to recent legislation enabling ministers to instruct poultry keepers to keep birds indoors, a measure that is being discussed with the industry but is not yet in force as no bird flu case has been confirmed in Britain, outside a quarantine centre in Essex.

Mrs Beckett told MPs that two parrots there had died of bird flu and that initial tests on a total of 32 dead birds had identified the virus in some of them.

Instructions have been issued for a case-by-case risk assessment of every bird released from quarantine, she said.

The birds in quarantine had been culled and staff who came into contact with them given anti-viral drugs, she said, adding:

"The quarantine system is succeeding in providing the protection that it is in place to deliver.

"That is not a reason for complacency. We are taking these developments very seriously, but they are not in themselves a cause for undue alarm."

### **Cutting through the panic: the facts about the virus and its transmission**

*Q So what exactly is avian influenza and where is it found?*

A The H5N1 virus, known as avian influenza or bird flu, is a lethal virus found in the gut of a wide variety of poultry. It has been able to infect humans, but only in 119 confirmed cases. The worrying statistic is that just over half have died.

*Q How do birds catch it and can they transmit it?*

A They excrete the virus, which can then get into the guts of other birds as they forage for food.

There is a particularly high level of risk when the water birds drink from is contaminated.

*Q Is there a very big risk of humans catching it?*

A Humans are only thought to be at risk if they breathe in the virus. This means the bird excreta must be dried and powdered in the environment, then thrown up into the air and inhaled in significant quantities. This has led scientists to believe only people in close contact with birds, such as people working in poultry farms, are at serious risk.

However, pathogenic viruses like bird flu can get into the blood supply of infected birds. Drinking raw or slightly cooked chicken blood - a practice in Vietnam at some celebratory meals - is a potential source of human infection, although this has not been confirmed.

The fear is that the virus will mutate, either within birds or by mixing with human, or possibly pig forms of flu to become a disease that is both highly contagious and highly lethal. Some scientists have said this is "only a matter of time".

However, lethal viruses tend to get weaker as time passes, a process called attenuation, as those strains which kill their host also kill themselves.

There were two cases in Thailand of possible human-to-human transmission. However, these have been isolated examples which have not led to the feared pandemic strain.

*Q Can you catch it from eating eggs or chicken?*

A There is almost certainly no risk of catching bird flu by eating eggs, because sick chickens stop laying them and the bird flu virus lives in the animal's gut. Eating a chicken is also unlikely to be a risk, but few scientists are prepared to entirely rule this out.

Cooking food to 70C will kill the virus and it is a good idea with all meat to ensure it is thoroughly cooked to avoid exposure to bugs. There have been no confirmed cases of bird flu in European Union poultry, so eggs and chickens currently in the shops are believed to be safe.

#### • **British government advice on bird flu**

#### **Web links**

- Dept of Health - pandemic flu  
<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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