

  
THE SCOTSMAN

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## Latest cases put bird flu on Europe's doorstep

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BIRD flu has been diagnosed in three people near the Turkish capital, Ankara - the first time the deadly H5N1 virus has struck humans so close to the borders of Europe.

Authorities said last night they did not know how the two brothers, aged five and two, and a 60-year-old had acquired the infection. However it is reported the three came from a town, about an hour from Ankara, where ducks had been affected by the disease.

The cases, which have still to be officially confirmed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) labs, are the first in western Asia - which includes part of Turkey. About 500 miles east of Ankara, a boy of five and his eight-year-old sister from Van, a city near the Iranian border, have also tested positive for the H5N1 strain, it was confirmed by British and Turkish laboratories yesterday.

Another brother and sister in Van had also been found to be positive for H5N1 in preliminary tests, Turan Buzgan, a health ministry official, said last night. Two children from the same region were confirmed to have died from the virus last week and it is suspected a third also fell victim. If these cases are confirmed, it would bring the total number of bird flu cases in Turkey to ten, with seven deaths.

The authorities have begun a mass cull of poultry in an effort to stop the disease spreading. So far, H5N1 has been capable in rare cases of passing from poultry to humans in close contact with them, but not from human to human.

Professor Hugh Pennington, of Aberdeen University, president of the Society for General Microbiology, said: "The most important thing is to get the virus stamped out in Turkey before it spills over into continental Europe. It's not a long distance and birds are flying around all the time. It's quite scary from that point of view."

He emphasised there was nothing to suggest the virus had mutated and had been passed from human to human. In the short term, he said, the largest threat was to poultry, not people.

Last week the virus claimed the lives of two children from Van - 14-year-old Mehmet Ali and his 15-year-old sister Fatma. Tests are still being carried out to establish if their sister, Hulya, 11, also died from H5N1. Twenty people in the city remain in hospital under treatment for suspected bird flu.

A team of seven WHO doctors is in Turkey to help investigate the deaths and look for any signs of transmission between humans. But harsh wintry weather in the Van region is hampering their progress.

Maria Cheng, a WHO spokeswoman, said the organisation was investigating whether the



disease had been transmitted, but Recep Akdag, the Turkish health minister, said there was no reason to suspect it had. He urged calm, but Dr Gencay Gursoy, head of the Istanbul Physicians Association, said the situation was grave: "Turkey and the world are facing the threat of a serious infection."

Tests were under way to determine whether any of the dozens of Turks hospitalised with suspected bird flu had contracted the strain, but the reports have already triggered panic.

Health officials believe the best way to fight the spread of bird flu is the wholesale destruction of poultry in the affected area. More than 30,000 fowl have been culled so far, private NTV television said. But this can be difficult in places like Dogubayazit, where chickens are sometimes a family's most valuable possession.

Officials have had difficulties in explaining to residents the danger of close interaction with poultry, and the need to deliver all birds for destruction whether or not they appear to be sick.

Russia's chief epidemiologist has urged his countrymen not to travel to eastern parts of Turkey because of the bird flu outbreak. Iran has also introduced restrictions on its borders. Birds in Romania, Russia and Croatia have recently tested positive for H5N1.

### 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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