

THE SCOTSMAN

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A boy in the eastern Turkish village of Dogubayazit, where bird flu has so far killed three children, tries to catch a chicken so that it can be destroyed.

Picture: Mustafa Ozer/AFP/Getty Image

Outbreaks of bird flu gather speed

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Key points

- Experts warn bird flu is heading for Britain
- Fourteen people in Turkey now thought to have bird flu; 60 with symptoms
- The latest five cases to be reported involve children aged four to 12

Key quote

"The problem is that the vaccines being produced at the moment are based on the current strain of the virus. It is not clear whether when it changes into a pandemic form that the vaccines will still be effective" - *Prof Blakemore*

Story in full BIRD flu is relentlessly heading for Britain, experts warned yesterday, as five more children in Turkey were found to have the disease.

A total of 14 people in Turkey are now thought to have contracted bird flu, including three children from the same family, who died.

About 60 people with flu-like symptoms - including 23 in Istanbul - were also being tested in hospital to see if they have the deadly H5N1 strain. If confirmed, the cases in Istanbul would be the first in continental Europe.

On a visit to the worst-affected part of Turkey, a senior World Health Organisation official warned the increase in human cases made the prospect of a major worldwide pandemic more likely.

And the growing crisis in Turkey will be a sign of things to come in Britain if migrating wild birds bring the disease to this country.



Experts yesterday warned of dire consequences for the poultry industry and said the public at large should be "concerned" but avoid panic.

The emergency services have been preparing for the prospect that up to 750,000 people in the UK could die if there was a bird flu pandemic, but other experts have said the figure could be as high as two million.

Professor Colin Blakemore, the chairman of the Medical Research Council, said he believed bird flu would at some point spread to Britain. "I think the chance must be high because birds do migrate, but it is not a cause for panic," he said.

However, he added: "Although it is not a cause for panic, there is certainly a cause for concern, preparation and vigilance."

Prof Blakemore advised British people to stay away from the affected areas in Turkey and said vulnerable people in the UK, such as the elderly, should have vaccinations against common flu.

He said: "The problem is that the vaccines being produced at the moment are based on the current strain of the virus.

"It is not clear whether when it changes into a pandemic form that the vaccines will still be effective. It is a very good idea for those groups at a higher risk who get vaccinations for conventional flu to do so."

The latest five cases to be reported, all children aged four to 12, are in the Black Sea provinces of Kastamonu, Corum and Samsun, and a further case in Van.

There are tourist resorts on the Black Sea and Turkey's best province for skiing holidays is Kastamonu, but only a few independent travellers visit this part of the country, with most UK holidaymakers heading for the south-east Mediterranean.

The great fear is that H5N1, which currently can only be caught from birds, will mutate into a different form that can be passed from human to human like ordinary flu, while retaining its ability to kill large numbers of those infected.

Guenael Rodier, a senior World Health Organisation official for communicable diseases, said it was clear that the virus was now "well-established" in the area around Dogubayazit in Van province in the east.

Mr Rodier, who was in Dogubayazit yesterday, said there was no sign that the disease had mutated into a strain that was infectious among humans.

However, he added: "The more humans infected with the avian virus, the more chance it has to adapt. We may be playing with fire."

The outbreaks have been occurring in Turkey because of the close interaction there between humans and animals and this had to be minimised, Mr Rodier said.

"The frontline between children and animals, particularly backyard poultry, is too large," he said.

However, there was some good news yesterday, when Ali Hasan Kocyigit, six, was

released from Van hospital after tests indicated he did not have the disease. His three siblings all died from the disease.

Worried Turks rushed to hospitals yesterday for tests for the virus. Thirteen children were among the 23 people undergoing tests for bird flu in Istanbul, a teeming city of 12 million which is the country's commercial hub and the gateway to Europe from Asia.

The Turkish health minister, Recep Akdag, said he was confident Turkey would overcome the outbreak, but warned the country would continue to be at risk for years as it lies on the path of migratory birds. He urged people to abandon raising poultry in backyards. "If as a community we take the necessary measures and educate [people], we can in a short period of time combat this," he said.

The EU banned imports of live birds and poultry products, including feathers, from Turkey last October, during the last bird flu outbreak. From yesterday, imports of untreated bird feathers are also banned from countries bordering eastern Turkey - Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Syria, Iran and Iraq.

Professor Hugh Pennington of Aberdeen University, the president of the Society of General Microbiology, said the situation "has distinctly raised the possibility that it will come here to Britain".

However, he said this was "by no means inevitable", adding: "Bird flu will need a bit of luck to come here and let's hope it doesn't get it because the consequences for our poultry industry would be as disastrous as foot-and-mouth disease was for cattle."

The Chief Veterinary Officer Debbie Reynolds said the government and industry were on alert. "It is a concern, what is going on in Turkey. It's not inevitable that the UK will get avian flu. But obviously there is a risk," she said.

"We've strengthened biosecurity, we've stepped up disease prevention. I would urge yet again all people who keep birds to report any signs of disease.

"We can very quickly investigate - the 70 or so that we investigated last year turned out to be negative for avian flu - and step up biosecurity."

The Liberal Democrat environment spokesman Norman Baker said the government should "prepare for the worst" in this country.

"It is very concerning that bird flu has reached so far west. Now is the time to ensure that we are fully prepared for an outbreak in the UK," he said.

"It is important to identify where all birds in the country are being held. Local authorities could take a role in this."

China confirmed its eighth human infection from bird flu yesterday, the latest victim being a six-year-old boy from the central Hunan province who is being treated in hospital.

Indonesia said tests showed a 39-year-old man had died from the virus earlier this month after contact with dead chickens. If confirmed, it would be the 12th death in Indonesia.

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/

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