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PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

To: Health Care Providers
From: Dr. Isaac Benowitz, State Epidemiologist
Subject: Summer Influenza Testing and Specimen Submission Request
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Summer Influenza Testing and Specimen Submission Request

Summary

In response to the continued global outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza A(H5N1) in wild birds and poultry, Maine CDC is encouraging testing for influenza among persons with respiratory illness. Additionally, Maine CDC is requesting that during the summer months (through September), all influenza A positive samples be submitted to the Maine Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory (HETL) for subtyping.

Background

Highly pathogenic avian influenza A(H5N1) is circulating globally in wild and domestic birds and has been detected in Maine since 2022. The most recent confirmed detection in Maine was in a wild bird on May 2, 2023. Globally, the World Health Organization has reported thirteen human cases of highly pathogenic avian influenza A(H5N1) including one in the U.S., between January 1, 2022, and June 1, 2023. Six were hospitalized and two died. Additionally, the risk for infection with influenza that normally circulates in swine, called variant influenza, increases during agricultural fair season, which lasts from April to October in Maine.

Public health surveillance for influenza A(H5N1) cases and variant (swine) influenza cases in Maine is crucial to early detection of these viruses in the state, especially in the summer months when influenza testing is not as commonly used and exposure to poultry and swine may increase due to agricultural fairs. The Maine Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory (HETL) is the only facility in Maine

capable of confirming novel influenza viruses, including variant influenza viruses and avian influenza A(H5N1).

Typically, infection with novel influenza viruses are clinically indistinguishable from that of seasonal influenza and should be managed per standard influenza treatment guidelines located at <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/antivirals/summary-clinicians.htm>.

Recommendations for Clinicians

- **Testing:** Given the severity of some recent human infections with A(H5N1) viruses, Maine CDC is asking that clinicians continue influenza testing for patients with respiratory illness during summer months (through September). This is in addition to standing recommendations that clinicians should always consider influenza testing, and subsequent specimen submission, for patients with respiratory illness at higher risk for contracting novel influenza, such as those with recent exposure to wild birds, poultry, or swine.
- **Specimen submission:** Maine CDC requests that hospitals, long-term care facilities, provider offices, and clinical laboratories send **all** influenza A positive samples to HETL during the summer months (through September), to help identify cases of novel influenza.

These steps are important for continued surveillance of novel influenza in the U.S., including A(H5N1), as well as to efficiently detect variant influenza A cases, if they occur.

Reporting

Human infection with any novel influenza A virus is notifiable in Maine and should be reported to Maine CDC immediately upon suspicion by phone at 1-800-821-5821. Maine CDC also requests that healthcare providers and clinical laboratories report all positive influenza test results during times of low seasonal influenza circulation, such as the summer months.

For More Information

- Maine CDC influenza webpage: <https://www.maineclu.gov>
- US CDC Influenza webpage: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/index.htm>
- FluView Novel Influenza A Virus Infections: https://gis.cdc.gov/grasp/fluview/Novel_Influenza.html
- Maine CDC Requisition Form: <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/public-health-systems/health-and-environmental-testing/micro/download-forms.htm>
- Maine CDC specimen submission information: <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/public-health-systems/health-and-environmental-testing/micro/submitting-samples.shtml>