

Commission takes stock of citizens' bird flu knowledge

"The avian influenza has become a seasonal pattern and is very likely to come back to Europe as long as it is endemic in Asia and Africa. We now need to learn to live with it and protect the high risk groups (those with backyard poultry and those with occupational health threats such as veterinarians)," said the director of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), Zsuzsanna Jakab, in a press conference taking stock of the first year of bird flu in the EU. In the briefing, Claus Sorensen from the Commission's Directorate General Communication said that the current 'avian flu fatigue' of both the public and the media could change back into a 'media frenzy' in autumn, when new wave of bird flu outbreaks is expected to hit Europe as birds start to migrate.

In order to test EU citizens' knowledge, well before a possible pandemic, on avian influenza and on the measures taken to prevent it from spreading, a special Eurobarometer survey was conducted in the spring 2006. The results, published on 7 July 2006, show that EU citizens are well informed about the virus, the preventive measures taken and the EU legislation on the issue. However, gaps remain in people's knowledge about risks related to avian influenza. Only 47%, for example, know that eating poultry, which has been vaccinated against avian influenza, is safe.

"To avoid public insecurity, it is extremely important to co-ordinate the communication on avian influenza at all levels. The messages at European, national and local levels need to be consistent. Incoherent messages create fears," said Claus Sorensen.

According to the Commission, the EU-25 is far better prepared to new outbreaks now, than in autumn 2005. "We're half-way up in the preparedness," said the Director General for Health and Consumer Protection, Robert Madelin. "We now need to avoid panic by correctly informing citizens and to engage in a dialogue with the media."

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