CHANGING PARADIGM:

Protecting Farmworkers against Influenza A (H5N1)

Event Background

- Outbreaks of H5N1 began in poultry during 2022 and dairy cattle during 2024.
- Historically, some animal production industries may have needed minimal, regularly worn personal protective equipment to protect the health of their workers.
- Avian influenza viruses continually change.
- The dramatic increase in 2024 of farmworker infection with H5 influenza A indicates the risk of influenza to workers may be changing.

Key Point: Workwear used historically to protect farm workers is not fully effective to prevent spread of new influenza strains from infected animals to farmworkers.

- Protecting farmworkers from influenza helps protect health of the worker, their family, and their community.

CDC Study

- CDC partnered with health departments in Michigan and Colorado to investigate farmworker infection with influenza A (H5), regardless of whether they felt ill.
- Of 115 total farmworker participants, 8 (7%) had evidence of recent infection with H5N1.
    - Among these 8 farmworkers, all reported either milking cows or cleaning the milking parlor, but only 4 recalled feeling ill around the time cows were ill.

Influenza A (H5) Human Infections

- At least 66 confirmed human influenza A (H5) infections have occurred in 2024 among farmworkers in the United States poultry and dairy industry.
- All farmworker infections have been mild to date, including conjunctivitis and some with mild respiratory symptoms.
    - H5N1 has the potential to cause severe infection.
        - In 2024, a Canadian teenager and a Louisiana resident were hospitalized with severe influenza A (H5) infections with suspected links to animal infections.

CALL TO ACTION: To best protect against influenza infection in farmworkers, personal protective equipment (PPE) should be used.

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

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Protective Equipment Recommendations

Exposure Level	Protective Equipment Recommendations
High Risk Exposure - Work with sick or dead animals on affected farms - Work in milking parlors or contact with raw milk on farms with animals infected with H5N1 bird flu (affected farms)	Respirator mask, coveralls, safety goggles, boots, disposable gloves, headcover
Medium Risk Exposure - Animal contact on unaffected farms but in an area with infected animals in the region - Work with healthy non-lactating animals on farms affected by H5N1	Respirator mask, safety goggles, disposable gloves
Low Risk Exposure - Work that does not involve direct contact with animals, or only includes animal contact in areas without any animals affected by H5N1	No enhanced protective equipment recommended

Symptomatic Farmworkers

- To detect potential human infections with influenza A (H5N1), SD-DOH asks farm employers to encourage any workers who are exposed to H5N1-infected animals AND develop symptoms, to seek medical care.
- Appropriate samples need to be sent by a medical provider to the State Public Health Laboratory to test for H5N1.
- Influenza testing available at a local clinical/hospital cannot identify influenza A (H5N1).
- Exposed and symptomatic farmworkers are recommended to receive a prescription for antiviral medication to decrease the risk of severe infection.

Engagement

- If you have questions or would like to discuss the human health risks for your operation or organization, please contact us:
  - General contact: epidemiology@state.sd.us
  - Vickie Horan, Influenza/Bioterrorism Epidemiologist
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