

Is there a vaccine for avian flu?

On April 17, 2007, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced approval of the first human vaccine to be used against the H5N1 influenza virus, commonly known as avian or bird flu.

How will this vaccine be used?

The vaccine could be used if the current H5N1 avian virus were to develop into a pandemic influenza strain. Should such an influenza pandemic strain emerge, the vaccine may provide early limited protection in the months before a more specific vaccine, tailored exactly to the pandemic strain, could be developed and produced.

While there have been no reported human cases of H5N1 infection in the United States, almost 300 people worldwide have been infected with this virus since 2003. This vaccine virus was obtained from a human strain and is intended to be used to immunize people 18 through 64 years of age who are at increased risk of exposure to the H5N1 influenza virus and developing illness. H5N1 influenza vaccine immunization consists of two intramuscular injections, given approximately one month apart. Together the shots contain 12 times the dose contained in regular flu shots.

How well does this vaccine work?

Clinical trials revealed that the vaccine was generally well tolerated, with the most common side effects reported as pain at the injection site, headache, general ill feeling and muscle pain. However, only 45% of vaccine recipients developed antibodies at a level expected to reduce the risk of getting influenza. Therefore, research continues to develop a better vaccine.

Where is this vaccine available?

The manufacturer will not sell the vaccine commercially. Instead, approximately 20 million doses of the vaccine will be purchased by the federal government, and placed in the U.S. Strategic National Stockpile for distribution by public health officials if needed.

What is the Strategic National Stockpile?

The U.S. Strategic National Stockpile is maintained by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It contains large quantities of medicine and medical supplies to protect the American public if there is a public health emergency. These resources can be delivered to any state in the United States within 12 hours.