Avian Influenza
An illness requiring airborne and contact precautions

What is avian influenza?
Avian influenza or the “bird flu” is an infection caused by viruses. These flu viruses occur naturally among birds. Wild birds carry the viruses in their intestines, but usually do not get sick from them. However, bird flu is very contagious among birds and can make some domesticated birds, including chickens, ducks, and turkeys very sick and may even kill them.

Avian influenza viruses do not usually infect humans, but several cases of human infection with bird flu viruses have occurred since 1997. So far, spread of the bird flu H5N1 virus from person to person has been rare, and spread has not continued beyond one person. However, because all flu viruses have the ability to change, scientists are concerned that the H5N1 virus could one day infect humans and spread easily from one person to another. Because these viruses do not commonly infect humans, there is little or no immune protection against them in the human population. If the H5N1 virus were able to infect people and spread easily from person to person, an “influenza pandemic” (worldwide outbreak of disease) could begin.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advises that travelers to countries in Asia with known outbreaks of avian influenza avoid poultry farms, contact with animals in live food markets, and any surfaces that appear to be contaminated with feces from poultry or other animals.

The Seattle/King County Health Department requires that persons diagnosed with avian influenza be reported to them so that they can take steps to protect the community.

What are the symptoms?
Symptoms of avian influenza in humans have ranged from typical flu-like symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches) to eye infections, pneumonia, severe respiratory diseases, and other severe and life-threatening complications. The symptoms of bird flu may depend on which virus caused the infection.

People with symptoms should practice “respiratory hygiene” by wearing a mask, washing their hands often, and disposing of tissues in waste-baskets when coming into a healthcare facility. Free “Cover Your Cough Kits” are available at the Information Desk and at clinic intake areas.
How is avian influenza spread?
Infected birds shed flu virus in their saliva, nasal secretions, and feces. Susceptible birds become infected when they have contact with contaminated excretions or surfaces that are contaminated with excretions. It is believed that most cases of bird flu infection in humans have resulted from contact with infected poultry or contaminated surfaces.

The time from when a person is exposed to flu virus to when symptoms begin is about 1 to 4 days, with an average of about 2 days.

Tell your healthcare provider if you think you have the flu and if you have traveled to an area where people have been reported to be ill with bird flu.

How is it diagnosed?
It is very hard to tell avian influenza from other viral or bacterial respiratory illnesses on the basis of symptoms alone. A virology test can confirm that the illness is avian influenza.

How are others protected from avian influenza?
At University of Washington Medical Center, we place an “Airborne and Contact Precautions” sign near the doorway of your room to alert healthcare workers, caregivers, and visitors to observe expanded precautions to prevent them from “catching” the bird flu. Visitors should wear the supplied masks, gowns, and gloves when entering the room and wash their hands when leaving.

What does it mean to be in airborne and contact precautions?
Healthcare workers wear Powered Air Purifying Respirators (PAPRs) or N-95 masks, gowns, and gloves when providing care.

Hand washing for 15 seconds, using alcohol hand gels, and environmental cleanliness are emphasized.
You will be asked to stay in your room unless you need to go to other departments in the hospital for treatment. If you leave your room, you will be asked to wash your hands and to wear a yellow gown, gloves, and a mask.
Please do not use the nutrition rooms while you are “in isolation.” When you want a snack or ice water, ask a member of your healthcare team to bring it to you.

When can the precautions be stopped?
Airborne and contact precautions for avian influenza or bird flu may be stopped when you no longer have symptoms and the health department is in agreement. Patients who have a compromised immune system may need to have a follow-up viral laboratory test showing that they are no longer infected with the virus.