Bird Flu: Is anyone ducking the issue?

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Americans and Canadians, on the other hand, have not lost their taste for poultry, which is also true of close to half of respondents in Hong Kong and Thailand.

Synovate conducted the survey from mid-January to early February 2006 among 7,040 respondents in Hong Kong, Indonesia, Thailand, France, Portugal, Serbia, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Turkey, Canada and the US. The study probed concerns over bird flu and how people have reacted to the threat of this disease.

The cases of bird flu among humans in Turkey have prompted changes in consumption patterns, says Temel Aksoy, Managing Director of Synovate Turkey. "The findings mirror sales figures for chicken and other poultry in Turkey, which have decreased drastically in recent months, despite advertising and public relations campaigns launched by producers to persuade consumers to buy chicken, other poultry and eggs."

Consumers in Hong Kong and Thailand, however, appear less daunted by poultry on the menu, despite coping with outbreaks of bird flu in the past. Jill Telford, Synovate's Managing Director in Hong Kong, attributes this to habit as well as public information campaigns: "People here love chicken, and they've also been told that if they cook it properly, there should not be a problem."

Worries about the threat of bird flu also vary considerably across the world, with Indonesians topping the list â€“ 83 percent of them were concerned about a possible bird flu pandemic in their country. Despite not making drastic changes to their eating habits, respondents in Hong Kong also reported high concerns (64 percent), as did the Turks (54 percent), Canadians (43 percent) and Portuguese (41 percent).

Scandinavians were the least concerned about a pandemic, and despite previous outbreaks of bird flu in Thailand, there was a surprisingly low level of concern there (36 percent).

Steven Britton, Managing Director of Synovate Thailand, points out that the timing of this study may have influenced the latter finding: "This survey coincided with the sale of one of the country's largest telecommunication operators, which is owned by the prime minister's family, and this topic has dominated the headlines due to its obvious political ramifications. It is therefore understandable that the bird flu issue has fallen in its front of mind importance for many Thais."

Such concerns notwithstanding, more than half of Asian respondents believe their countries are well prepared to handle a bird flu pandemic; the Thais are particularly confident, with 70 percent stating that their government is ready for such a contingency.

In contrast, respondents in the United States, Canada, Portugal and Turkey have much less faith in their nations' ability to handle an outbreak of bird flu, with less than a quarter of respondents in those countries believing their governments are well prepared.

"The Portuguese are currently experiencing hard financial times with rising unemployment and a stagnating economy," comments Teresa Veloso, Research Director at Synovate Portugal. "This environment establishes a breeding ground for a general distrust of government authorities, and public fears may be inflated out of proportion, which is reflected in the findings."

This apprehension over official contingency planning appears to have prompted people to take matters into their own hands. Seventy percent of Turkish respondents have sought out information about bird flu and how it can be avoided, as have 41 percent of Portuguese. At the other end of the spectrum, Americans and Scandinavians were the least likely to have taken any precautions.

Even casual encounters with our fine-feathered friends have been affected: A sizeable number of those surveyed in

Hong Kong (45 percent), Indonesia (38 percent), Thailand (51 percent) and Turkey (56 percent) have started avoiding birds of all species at places like zoos and parks.